

‘The whole world in miniature’, or ‘a bad return’? The 1749 Jubilee masquerade balls in polemic and print

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By the mid-1700s, the public masquerade ball had achieved extraordinary popularity and notoriety across London, drawing thousands to the city’s pleasure gardens. The phenomenon met its natural match in two successive earthquakes, believed by some to represent a divine judgement against an increasingly pleasure-seeking society. This article compares two responses to the 1749 Jubilee masquerade balls at Ranelagh Gardens, a venue renowned for its exoticism and glamour. Louis-Philippe Boitard’s engraving wryly presents masquerade as a celebration of English eccentricity and eclecticism, while an anonymous pamphlet attacks it as a dangerous foreign import which had damaged British masculinity and morality. Through considering their language and images, the article explores how and why the Jubilee balls became such a potent social barometer of their time.

On 2 September 1749, Ferdinando Warner, Rector of St Paul’s Cathedral, delivered a sermon to mark the anniversary fast for the 1666 fire, a ‘Judgement upon This City’ still recent enough to strike his congregation with fear. Warner also had other calamities to address: the War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748), decades of conflict with France, the 1745 Jacobite rebellion which had brought ‘the Calamities of a Civil War to our very Doors’ and, in the countryside, ‘a Contagious Distemper among the Cattle’. The Rector drew a parallel between 1749 and 1666, arguing that the ‘promiscuous Lewdness’ of the earlier period had re-emerged. The sermon was clear: such disasters showed that ‘the Hand of God is stretched out still upon us’.¹

Moral and religious anxieties such as these were not unusual. Horace Walpole wrote drily to his cousin, Henry Conway, that ‘Between the French and the earthquakes, you have no notion how good we are grown; nobody makes a suit of clothes now but of sackcloth turned up with ashes.’ The belief that loosened morals had contributed to increased divine judgements was widely satirised. Walpole developed his theme, ironising his contemporaries’ superstitions:

A few nights before, two men walking up the Strand, one said to t’other, ‘Look how red the sky is! Well, thank God! there is to be no masquerade!’²

As this implies, the masquerade ball had become a dangerous symbol of the degeneracy which Ferdinando Warner abhorred. Introduced to London in the 1720s, its glamour and promise of social freedoms drew

¹ Ferdinando Warner, *A sermon preach’d before the Right Honourable the Lord Mayor, and aldermen, of the City of London, at the cathedral church of St Paul, on Saturday, September 2 1749* (London: 1749), 11-19.

² ‘The Works of Horatio Walpole Earl of Orford’ in *Monthly Review, or, Literary Journal* ed. by Ralph Griffiths (Nov 1798), 274.

thousands to Haymarket, Vauxhall and Ranelagh. Masquerades were the subjects of prints, paintings and advertisements; even their entrance tickets became recognised motifs in novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). But they were also used as targets for xenophobic anxieties. For one Victorian commentator, the blame for masked balls lay with 'the importation of French corruption and immorality, so prevalent in [...] the whole reign of George II.'³ As Paul Tankard notes, critics argued that masquerades 'were not a form of entertainment or socializing that suited the English character'.⁴ Interestingly, however, the masquerade was also part of the development of a peculiarly English urban culture. As Terry Castle observes, despite their titles, the Jubilee balls at Ranelagh were more English than Italian in design. While they appeared to some a symbol of urban corruption, many of their features were shaped by increasing migration from the English countryside. Crucially, their commercial outlook meant that they were 'not defined solely by inherited rank'.⁵ This social eclecticism was their anarchy and their attraction: they were diverse gatherings which could just as well include the King as a Drury Lane prostitute. For Castle, masquerade balls were also liberating – in particular, they gave women a rare chance to mingle undetected.⁶

Such social heterogeneity is evident in Louis-Philippe Boitard's *The Jubilee Ball or the Venetian Manner* (Fig 1). In front of the Ranelagh rotunda, figures press together in a medley of costumes, their proximity suggesting the physical crush and excitement of the evening. Their gestures and positioning show how those disguised as nuns, priests, clowns, soldiers and ambassadors were perceived to mix freely with each other. It is as though they were caught in character: moving, gesturing, talking, jostling and competing for attention. Bodies strategically take part in a series of juxtapositions as neighbours wear opposed or incongruous disguises (the monk and the lady, the clergyman and the prostitute). Beneath their costumes, too, there lurks an implied opposition between the masquers' inner selves and their outward dress – a central antithesis which stimulated gender-swapping, class fluidity and intrigue. In a further contrast, the still, mannered background of the gardens contrasts with the dynamic, carnivalesque quality of the 'masks', creating a staged image, as masquers in costume become actors twice over, surrounded by a formalised set. In this way, the polite umbrella of Ranelagh seems to shelter and endorse the animation and self-consciousness of masquerade.

³ 'Satires and Caricatures of the Eighteenth Century' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol 64 (November 1848), 550.

⁴ *Facts and Inventions: Selections from the Journalism of James Boswell* ed. by Paul Tankard (Yale: Yale University Press, 2014), 315.

⁵ Hannah Greig, 'All Together and All Distinct: Public Sociability and Social Exclusivity in London's Pleasure Gardens, ca. 1740-1800', in *Journal of British Studies*, vol 15, 1 (January 2012), 55.

⁶ Terry Castle, 'Eros and Liberty at the English Masquerade, 1710-1790' in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol 17, 2 (Winter, 1983-84), 161.



Figure 1: Louis-Philippe Boitard, *The Jubilee Ball or the Venetian manner, or Masquerade at Ranelagh Gardens* (1749), hand-coloured etching, 31.7 × 40.3cm (The British Museum collection; photograph The British Museum, London)

The accompanying text adds sharp satire to the engraving. The title ‘By the King’s Command’ ironically reflects that this scene of subversion was in fact ordered by the reigning monarch George II. The rhyming couplets beneath take the levity of the image and darken it with precise criticism, as though written by ‘a disappointed non-conformist who had not only had his pocket picked, but also lost his umbrella’.⁷ The writer derides ‘Foreign follies’ which create ‘motley shapes’ in our ‘warlike Heroes’, commenting on the perceived impact of French and Italian fashions on English masculinity. Lines deliberately juxtapose contraries, from ‘ye Nun the Friar’ to ‘the Turk [...] a Christian Dame’, highlighting the obvious irony of these masked liaisons. Deliberately, at the end, ‘Mad Tom’, a popular folk figure, and ‘Punch’, the clown, are sarcastically described as ‘Moral Figures to top the Jovial set’, a remark which undercuts the entire verse. The language chosen by the anonymous writer adds political commentary, exposing royalty as weak and flimsy in its love of pleasure: ‘straw-wav’d sceptre rules’. Overall, the text suggests that such behaviour is simply ‘the whole world in miniature’, a state of the nation which cannot be checked. Its voice of dry ridicule complements Boitard’s warm engraving, producing a blended perspective on masquerade, from delineation to production. A purchaser of the print could enjoy the image, or the verse, or both – a hybrid view which is particularly apt for the many-layered ball itself.

⁷ Randall Davies, ‘English Society of the Eighteenth Century in Contemporary Art’ ed. by Philip Hammerton, *The Portfolio: monographs on artistic subjects* (London, 1907), 31.

This approach to masquerade is paralleled in an anonymous pamphlet, *Jubilee Masquerade Balls at Ranelagh Gardens* (1750), although here the blended voice is created through the author's deliberate ordering of sources. Rather as a Chinese box, the artefact's introduction and conclusion 'frame' five excerpted voices of censure, from Part I, the legal authority of 'the Presentment of the Grand Jury of Middlesex' (1729) to Part V, the editor's concluding thoughts (Fig.2).

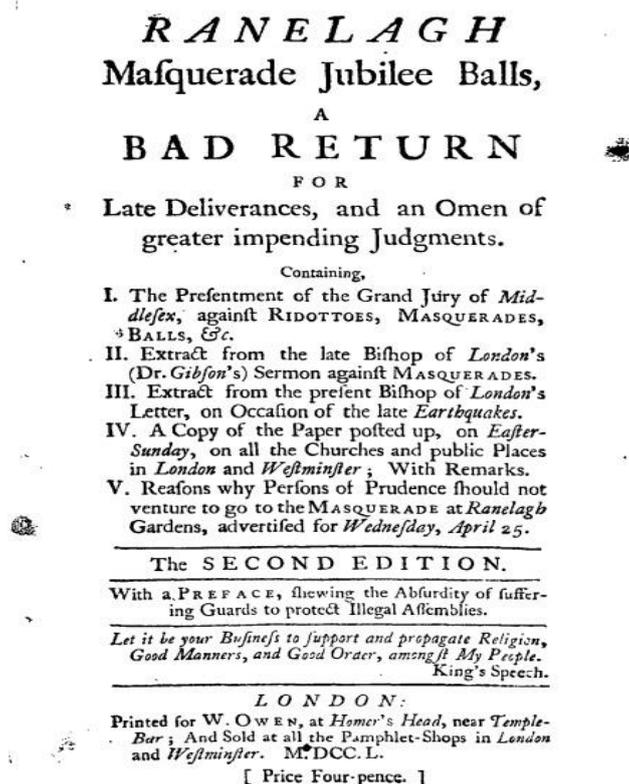


Figure 2: *Ranelagh Jubilee Masquerade Balls, A Bad Return*, 2nd ed (London: W Owen, 1750)

The pamphlet, which ran to two editions, builds negative rhetoric through this framed polemic, cohering all into an inexorable chronology against Jubilee balls. In contrast with the engraving's headline, the editorial begins with an unironic exhortation, taken from King George's speech to the clergy: 'Let it be your Business to support and propagate Religion, Good Manners, and Good Order, amongst my People.'⁸ The monarch is therefore set apart to suggest his censure of masquerade – a fact satirically contested in the engraving's juxtaposition of 'Majesty relaxed from Cares of State' with the 'motley mortals' he encounters.

⁸ *Jubilee Masquerade Balls at Ranelagh Gardens, A Bad Return for The Merciful Deliverance from the late Earthquakes* (London: W Owen, 1750), 4.

The frontispiece provides a rhetorical structure which underpins the pamphlet's argument. By placing Bishop of London's sermon (Part II) after the Presentment (Part I), the editor coheres legal and religious authorities to endorse his criticism and accelerate the urgency of the debate. Their reprinting also acts as a warning unheeded by the masquers of the mid-1700s, as though validating the destruction threatened by the pair of earthquakes felt in February and March 1750. In a similarly apocalyptic vein, the clergyman Philip Doddridge had already drawn an explicit link between Capernaum's earthquake in 749AD and London's own tremors in 1749 to suggest that divine retribution was not only justified but part of a biblical plan to reform mankind.⁹ Like the balls themselves, the earthquakes provided considerable copy, not only for bishops but for satirists. The idea that stopping masquerades would appease God's wrath received a biting response: 'Numbers of People do now get their daily Bread by Earthquakes; The clergy preach upon them [...] they discover all Sorts of Wickedness and Debauchery in a Masquerade, which has hitherto passed quite unobserved by them'.¹⁰

The parallels between earthquakes and nature, masquerades and commercial artifice form the spine of the pamphlet. In Part IV, the editor adds his own voice to the debate through the deliberately casual but final 'N.B.', 'not to venture to go to Ranelagh Gardens that Day [25 April 1749]' for fear of being seized and 'publicly exposed to the World'.¹¹ This framing device, delivered in the tone of friendly guidance, deftly legitimises the words of the public poster, which decrees that 'if such Wickednesses [masquerades] are permitted, the next shock of an Earthquake may well be dreaded'. The poster juxtaposes the number of masquerade advertisements with the tremors themselves, stating that 'the very next Week' there were further announcements in 'One Paper'. In this way, the poster implies that promotion alone is corrupt enough: the entire commercial venture is criticised as antithetical to morality and natural order. Satirists quickly inverted this line of argument, using the Bishop of London (whose letter forms Part III of the pamphlet) as their prime target. Recounting the 1750 tremors in exaggerated detail, the author describes how the Bishop was the 'very first Man that was sunk', for 'he might have escaped, but his zeal was so great in distributing Copies of his Letter'.¹² In this image, fit for caricature, the zealot is consumed by his own mission, killed by the very thing which had made his name. Ironically, then, masquerades and earthquakes had become commercial rivals: each, in its own way, ground-breaking. The debate had entered popular culture and it had political impact, too.

⁹ Philip Doddridge, *The guilt and doom of Capernaum* (London: J Waugh, 1750), 24.

¹⁰ P.D, *A Full and True Account of the Dreadful and Melancholy Earthquake* (London: T. Tremor, 1750), 15.

¹¹ *Jubilee Masquerade Balls at Ranelagh Gardens*, 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

As a foreign import, the masquerade ball attracted increased suspicion. In *Jubilee Masquerade Balls at Ranelagh Gardens*, the origin of the masquerade is firmly planted: ‘it was brought among us by the Ambassador of a neighbouring Nation in the last Reign [...] there is not a more effectual way to enslave a People’.¹³ Like the Swiss impresario Louis Heidegger and, later, the Venetian Teresa Cornelys, this ‘Ambassador’, the French duc d’Aumont, received particular censure for promoting the masquerade in England. The Bishop’s language shows how closely critics associated an increase in public leisure with a decrease in national strength. For some, the masked assembly seemed indicative of how English identity was changing as a result of foreign influence: as Tankard observes, ‘The English, it was argued, were candid and open, not naturally calculating or manipulative’.¹⁴ The literal masking of the face ran contrary to the plain-speaking image of John Bull which British propaganda was so eager to promote.

The pamphlet’s Presentment (Part I) also attacks Heidegger who ‘to screen himself’ calls masquerades ‘balls’, arguing that the lack of shame which disguise creates means ‘no one’s Character is responsible’, for maskers are ‘covered from the Eye of the World’. The ability to become someone else, if only ironically, is held up as unnatural and therefore un-English. It also calls for Heidegger, ‘the Contriver and Carrier-on’, to be ‘detected and punished according to law’, showing the extent to which the authorities sought to blame foreign individuals rather than national evolution for changing social behaviour. In Hogarth’s *Masquerade Ticket* (1727), the mere act of holding a masquerade ticket leads inevitably to the corrupt ‘Venetian’ or ‘Italian manner’. The entrance token itself is the subject of this engraving, meta-textually giving the viewer access to a ball. Within it, the exclusive façade which Heidegger’s tickets were designed to create is satirically stripped away, revealing two so-called ‘lecherometers’ (devices which apparently measured sexual inclinations) and a clock face marked by the words ‘Impertinence’, ‘Nonsense’ and ‘Wit’.

In *The Jubilee ball or the Venetian manner*, however, such foreign influence is accepted rather than criticised. On the canvas, Boitard presents an assembled company, as though offering actors for assessment through their shared experience. The body language of the participants and the rhythmic patterning of rhyming verse below suggest the carnivalesque spirit of the event. Boitard’s representation is rich in heterogeneity: the home characters mix with comical and excessively romantic continental symbols such as the ‘Domme with Monstrous Nose’, ‘Cyprian Isle and Venus Court’. All costumes are ridiculous; all contribute to a subversive and openly international company. The ‘motley’ assortment of costumes is ‘free from frowns’: drily, the verse observes that each ‘new Device’ is adopted so quickly in England that France ‘cannot fast enough supply the call’. Here, interestingly, it is English desire rather than foreign plotting which is to

¹³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴ *Facts and Inventions: Selections from the Journalism of James Boswell* ed. by Paul Tankard (Yale: Yale University Press, 2014), 315.

blame for the spread of masquerade, while the ‘gradual displacement of folk communities’ which Castle has observed elsewhere in English pleasure-garden balls is also evident in Boitard’s representations of costume.¹⁵ There is a blend of British eccentricity and folklore: ‘the humble Plaid’, ‘Mad Tom’ and ‘Punch’: the latter, big-bellied, strides across the canvas, Tom O’Bedlam waves sticks in the air and a kilted Highlander bows to a lady. These are identifiably English and Scottish stereotypes which, following the 1707 Union, were increasingly part of British identity.

A similar sense of universality and cultural eclecticism is captured in Horace Walpole’s description of the same Ranelagh Jubilee ball. In another letter to Conway, Walpole wryly notes that this ‘Venetian manner’ ball had ‘nothing Venetian in it’ but rather, ‘a Maypole dressed with garlands and people dancing round it to a tabor and pipe and rustic music’. Multiple co-ordinating conjunctions lend a tone of chaotic amateurishness to the sentence, suggesting a comical juxtaposition of Italian refinement and clumsy English rusticity. The inclusion of these traditional, Edenic symbols of English country fairs is intriguing: here, the foreign import has been adapted to fit a domestic picture, with ‘natural flowers hanging from tree to tree’.¹⁶ It also points to a more significant desire to connect with past public rituals and community at a time of new urban expansion. As a pleasure garden, Ranelagh provided an element of hospitality and even identification: there, people could participate in and belong to something greater than their own private lives. It seems that the masquerade was not merely a licentious escape but an attractive bridge between private leisure and public belonging, allowing masquers to participate in something collective while retaining an element of anonymity.

The threat and allure of masquerade were fused in the subversion and controversy of gender roles. In Figure 1, Boitard places a female figure at the centre of his canvas, exactly where an anonymous engraving, *Masquerade for the Venetian Ambassador* (1749) would position Elizabeth Chudleigh, dressed in costume as a near-naked Iphigenia, following her scandalous appearance at Ranelagh the same year. In this second print, the body language of the three central characters, men flanking the white, semi-naked female figure, is almost identical to Boitard’s representation. This surely reflects the heightened infamy of Elizabeth Chudleigh herself, satirically described as ‘tow’ring far, above each pigmy elf’ in a contemporary verse.¹⁷ (Ironically, in an event attacked so frequently for the subversion of its disguises, it was Chudleigh’s apparent nakedness which attracted public censure.) These prints share a conscious staging of a divisive female presence as central to and almost synonymous with the act of masquerade. However, in *Jubilee*

¹⁵ Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilisation: the Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 17.

¹⁶ Randall Davies, ‘English Society of the Eighteenth Century in Contemporary Art’, 32.

¹⁷ *A Poetical Epistle to Miss C_h_y: Occasioned by her appearing in the Character of Iphigenia* (London, T Andrew, 1749), 10.

Masquerades at Ranelagh Gardens, it is anxiety about appropriate displays of masculinity which is most strongly expressed. Dressing up and masking oneself creates ‘Effeminacy’ which will ‘enfeeble’ male strength and heterosexuality; in Part II, the Bishop’s sermon states that the masquerade’s arrival was co-existent with the introduction of the ‘unnatural and detestable Sin of Sodomy’, ‘transplanted from those hotter Climates to our more temperate Country’.¹⁸ The threat of deviance which masquerade offered – in particular, the allusions which it carried to homosexuality – is unambiguously associated with un-British behaviour. The language circles around questions of nature: England is ‘temperate’ where other countries are ‘hotter’, implying that at home, sexual passions and desires are regulated and protected against what is ‘unnatural’. Sodomy itself is compared to a sapling or seed, ‘transplanted’ – suggesting its otherness and its ability to affect and even supplant native sexuality.

As well as sexual freedoms, masquerades offered the promise of a massed classless experience. Boitard’s image portrays an eclectic though restricted, even exclusive scene, but Walpole writes of their being at least ‘two thousand’ at the Jubilee ball on 26 April.¹⁹ The 1749 engraving’s text notes dryly that ‘this Scheme makes even Contraries agree’, pointing to masquerade’s illusion of concord and egalitarianism. The opportunity to dissemble above or below social rank carried a frisson of excitement in an increasingly self-conscious and urbanised environment. That this was a temporary measure added to the attraction: at the end of the masquerade, natural order would be restored. In comparison, it is interesting to note that the pamphlet identifies such levelling of hierarchy as a more permanent danger for poorer men, who are liable to ‘fall into the Diversions and Manners of those who are of a superior Rank and Character’.²⁰ This suggests somewhat paternalistically that the lower classes are naturally unable to evade the trap of masquerade and that this entrapment will last long after the ball has ended. In some ways, the egalitarian, disguised freedom of the ball exposed grosser social evils, divisions and prejudices.

By 1751, the Bishop of London had acquired a temporary ban on public masquerades. In Walpole’s beautifully weighted sentence, ‘Masquerades had been abolished, because there had been an earthquake at Lisbon’.²¹ The ‘bad return’ had been punished by a combination of apocalyptic rhetoric, rising nationalism and establishment anxiety. Between them, *Jubilee Masquerade Balls at Ranelagh* and *The Jubilee Ball or the Venetian Manner* use satire and propaganda to reveal that the masked ball was more than a glamorous event. It created its own tremors, exposing the moral and social fault-lines in an increasingly commercial and self-conscious eighteenth-century world.

¹⁸ *Jubilee Masquerade Balls at Ranelagh Gardens*, 12.

¹⁹ Randall Davies, ‘English Society of the Eighteenth Century in Contemporary Art’, 32.

²⁰ *Jubilee Masquerade Balls at Ranelagh Gardens*, 11.

²¹ Horace Walpole, *Memoirs of the Reign of King George II*, ed. by Henry Holland, vol 3 (London: H Colburn, 1847), 98.

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