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Ilias Chrissochoidis on a find at the Folger, the 2008 NABMSA conference schedule, book reviews and more

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"It's good to be a King": George I goes to the masquerade

by Ilias Chrissochoidis

If such a thing as historical counter-offensive exists, the Folger Shakespeare Library is the perfect example. Only blocks away from the US Congress and across the street from America's national library and supreme court, it lets British culture radiate through the heart of a former enemy. Folger's mission to institute an Anglophile Eden right on Capitol Hill would have delighted George III.

Less happy the good monarch would have been with one of Folger's recent acquisitions, an anonymous two-volume manuscript packed with Jacobite poetry. Unhappiness would have turned into fury, had he read "On the King's going to the Masquerade," a libelous satire on his great-grandfather and first ruler of the Hanoverian monarchy.

Musicologists remember George I as Handel's employer in Hanover and later in England. A

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NABMSA at its Third Biennial
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*Send your news, review requests, and article
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German prince who rose to the British throne only because of his Protestant religion, George disliked and was disliked in his new kingdom. He barely knew English, loathed British political freedoms, and spent as much time as he could in his native principality. It was on his way to Hanover, actually, that death paid him homage in June 1727.

On the bright side, George I liked opera and helped create the Royal Academy of Music, thus pushing London to the top tiers of European music centers. Equally excited was he about masquerades, introduced by opera manager John James Heidegger, one of Handel's earliest patrons in England. A huge cash machine, this type of aristocratic entertainment allowed Heidegger to offset chronic deficits from his opera productions and made him the undisputed leader of big spectacle in Britain. Strong objections from moralists and the clergy were not enough to prevent George from attending them. The satirical ballad, never published before, helps explain why:

On the King's going to the Masquerade. (1721.)

1.

Old George stealing out from his greasy old Frow,
To the late Masquerade, and a whoring would go,
For his Worship goes often a whoring you know.
Which nobody can deny, etc.

2.

He advis'd with his Council what Dress wou'd be best,
And he chose a Turks Habit, but Craggs did protest,
If he'd whore in perfection, he must be a Priest.
Which nobody, etc.

3.

A Fryar's old Gown was provided with speed,
With a very great Hood, of which he had need,
Came over his Horns, as well as his Head.
Which nobody, etc.

4.

Young Craggs having view'd the Maskers all round,
Told his Master, a delicate Girl he had found,
For in Ladies his Judgement was mighty profound.

Which nobody, etc.

5.

The old Gentleman eagerly follow'd the Scent,
And in florid High-Dutch he disclos'd his Intent,
The Girl by his Motion soon knew what he meant.
Which nobody, etc.

6.

He play'd with her Bubbies, and swore o'er and o'er,
That he never had felt such soft Bubbies as before,
For Begar me do love de soft Bubbies, he swore.
Which nobody, etc.

7.

She tipt him the Wink, and turn'd round on her Heel,
Saying, Sir, to the next private Room let us steal,
And the softest place in the World you shall feel.
Which nobody, etc.

8.

With transport, the Girl to the Chamber he led,
Now feel the soft place, my dear Creature, she said,
And clapt his lewd Hand upon his own Head.
Which nobody, etc.

9.

Then laughing, she left him, his passion to vent,
But George being told what 'twas that she meant,
Scratch'd his Head, and came home full as wise as he went.
Which nobody, etc.

[Folger, MS ADD 1215, vol. 2:30]

The ballad offers an insulting portrait of George I. He appears as a sexual pervert chasing voluptuous English girls despite his advanced age and linguistic impotency. Particularly offending is the last stanza, which denies him even the capacity for plain reasoning. The devastating contrast between the senile king and a clever girl leads to one conclusion: Britain doesn't deserve its

barbarian foreign ruler.

Such an incident could easily have been a Jacobite invention targeting a detested monarch. Much in the poem fits, however, the historical record. George was approaching sixty-one in early 1721. At this age, royal philandering in public space looked doubly ridiculous. The “greasy old Frow” was presumably Melusine von der Schulenburg, his unofficial spouse following a tragic divorce from his wife (a bloody affair suitable for Hollywood). The slur could partly apply to his other mistress, Sophia Charlotte von Kielmansegg, who was “corpulent & ample.” Horace Walpole recalled his terror as a child at “her enormous figure.” (1) Craggs, finally, was “James Craggs jun. Esq; one of his Majesty’s Principal Secretaries of State.” (2) The latter’s premature death on February 16, (3) helps date the incident in the winter of 1720/21.

Historical or fictional, the adventure had little effect on George’s fondness for masquerades. On March 18, 1721, he offered a present of £500 to Heidegger, (4) by then widely known as “Director of the King’s Balls.”(5) Although protests from the clergy eventually forced the temporary suspension of masquerades, (6) Heidegger soon replaced them with *ridottos* (“a *mask’d Masquerade*”(7)), which once again were “By’t^h Court approv’d of, by the K[ing] protected.” (8)

(1) Horace Walpole, *Reminiscences* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 29.

(2) *The Present State of the British Court* (London: A. Bell et al., 1720), 3.

(3) *The Daily Courant*, no. 6030, Friday 17 February 1721, [1]. Horace Walpole relates that he “caught his death by calling at the gate of Lady March, who was ill of the smallpox, & being told so by the Porter, went home directly, fell ill of the same distemper & died”: *Reminiscences*, 36.

(4) Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955), 124.

(5) [John Macky], *A Journey through England*, 2nd edn (London: J. Hooke, 1722), 68.

(6) Norman Sykes, *Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London, 1669-1748: A Study in Politics & Religion in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford University Press / London: Humphrey Milford, 1926), 187-92.

(7) *The Universal Spectator, and Weekly Journal*, no. 191, Saturday 3 June 1732, [1].

(8) Moses Statute, *Ridotto: Or, Downfall of Masquerades* (London: A. Moore, 1723), 11.