

## GEORGE I GOES TO THE MASQUERADE (1721)

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Students of early Hanoverianism will be intrigued by the discovery of an anonymous two-volume manuscript recently acquired by the Folger Shakespeare Library. Packed with Jacobite poetry, it includes among others a libelous satire on the dynasty's founder. George I 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. What he certainly liked about London was opera (his sponsorship of the Royal Academy of Music raised Britain's music profile) and particularly masquerades, introduced by opera manager John James Heidegger. 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. It also provided ground for the king's favorite sport, as the satirical ballad explains:

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 before,<sup>1</sup>  
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.

[US-Ws, MS ADD 1215, vol. 2:30]

This insulting account portrays George I as a sexual pervert chasing voluptuous English girls despite his advanced age and linguistic impotency. Particularly offensive is the last stanza, which denies him even the capacity for plain reasoning. The embarrassing contrast between the senile king and a smart native girl leads to one conclusion: Britain does not deserve its barbarian foreign ruler.

The 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 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 also apply to his other mistress, Sophia Charlotte von Kielmansegg, who was “corpulent & ample” (her “enormous figure” terrified the young Horace Walpole<sup>2</sup>). Craggs, finally, was “James Craggs jun. *Esq*; one of his Majesty's Principal Secretaries of State.”<sup>3</sup> The latter's premature death on February 16,<sup>4</sup> helps date the incident in the winter of 1720–1721.

Factual 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,<sup>5</sup> by then widely known as "Director of the King's Balls."<sup>6</sup> Although protests from the clergy eventually forced the temporary suspension of masquerades,<sup>7</sup> Heidegger soon replaced them with *ridottos* ("a *mask'd Masquerade*"<sup>8</sup>), which once again were "By th' Court approv'd of, by the K[ing] protected."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I am obliged to Dr. Georgianna Ziegler, Louis B. Thalheimer Head of Reference at the Folger Shakespeare Library, for emending my transcription of this line.

<sup>2</sup>Horace Walpole, *Reminiscences* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>*The Present State of the British Court* (London: A. Bell et al., 1720), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>*The Daily Courant*, no. 6030, Friday February 17, 1721. 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*, p. 36).

<sup>5</sup>Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955), p. 124.

<sup>6</sup>[John Macky], *A Journey through England*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Hooke, 1722), p. 68.

<sup>7</sup>Norman Sykes, *Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London, 1669–1748: A Study in Politics & Religion in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Humphrey Milford, 1926), pp. 187–192.

<sup>8</sup>*The Universal Spectator, and Weekly Journal*, no. 191, Saturday June 3, 1732.

<sup>9</sup>Moses Statute, *Ridotto: Or, Downfall of Masquerades* (London: A. Moore, 1723), p. 11.