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Spectacular Transience, or, How to Undermine a Military Triumph on the Early Modern English Stage

Abstract

This article examines the interpretation and refashioning of the Roman triumph motif within the theatrical culture of early modern England, contrasting its close connection with royal ceremonies and self-display against its paradoxical and ambivalent representation concerning fictional rulers in plays. It argues that the military triumph, with its associated martial imagery, enters into a dialogue with the triumphal discourse of masque-like entertainments and plays, yet is rarely, if ever, realized onstage. Through an analysis of texts ranging from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Henry V*, and *Julius Caesar* back to Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, and extending to the triumphal masques of the Stuart kings, the essay demonstrates a progressive dematerialization of the military triumph. Instead of a concrete celebration of military victory, the triumph becomes a site of memory, aspiration, foreboding, and ultimately, a powerful cultural signifier used to explore themes of power, identity, and the ephemeral nature of royal power. The study reveals how the absent or transformed triumph in these theatrical contexts paradoxically gains lasting resonance in the cultural imagination, often glorifying the imagined captive or highlighting the performative and ultimately transient nature of monarchical power, as seen in the Stuart era's shift towards peaceful and allegorical triumphs in their masques and royal self-representation.

1. *Echoes of Empire: The Roman Triumph and its English Renaissance Transformations*

For over a thousand years, victorious Roman generals were honoured with a triumph – a grand public procession celebrating military success. Granted by the Senate, the triumph was among Rome's highest honours, symbolizing not just the general's glory but Rome's supremacy. The parade featured the general in a chariot, clad in purple and gold, followed by troops, prisoners,

exotic animals, and spoils of war (Payne 1962, 9). More than a celebration of conquest, the triumph was a religious and political ritual that reinforced Rome's identity and divine favour (Miller 2001, 9). Over time, both the military aspects and ceremonial functions of the Roman triumph evolved across different cultures and periods. These transformations ranged from Christian interpretations to Renaissance triumphal ceremonies that showcased royal magnificence, including royal entries and Renaissance tournaments. The concept of the triumph extended beyond actual ceremonies, transitioning into literary representations where the Roman model was reimagined and imbued with additional meanings.

In this article I focus on the interpretation and refashioning of the triumph motif in the theatrical culture of early modern England, and its very close connection with royals' ceremonies and self-display, and contrast them with early modern fictional rulers and their paradoxical ambivalent notion of the military triumph. I discuss the way the military triumph insinuates itself into and enters into a conversation with the triumphal discourse of masque-like entertainments and plays. In the plays I consider, a military triumph is only something that can be remembered, evoked, longed for, projected into the future, imagined in advance, dreaded. But it is 'never' present: it is as insubstantial as the cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples that Prospero is enumerating in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, before being eliminated by the triumph of time, and the end of theatrical magic. It is "a site of contentions" (Miller 2001, 14) and paradoxical transformation, from military success to peace triumphant.

A striking visual example of the refashioning of the military triumph appears in the painting *Queen Elizabeth Going in Procession to Blackfriars* (1601) (fig. 1) later renamed *Eliza Triumphans* by Roy Strong (2003, 153). In it, the queen – dressed in white and adorned with jewels – sits in a canopy-covered litter carried by six gentlemen, surrounded by knights, ladies-in-waiting, and other courtiers. Much speculation has surrounded the painting: who commissioned it, what occasion it commemorates (a wedding, perhaps?), the identities of the gentlemen bearing the canopy and the ladies accompanying the queen, the architecture in the background, and notable absences such as the Earl of Essex. Some of these questions have been answered with some certainty (Strong 2003), while others remain open – and likely always will. What matters for our purposes, however, is how the painting combines and



Figure 1.

translates various triumphal traditions as an expression of monarchical power. It presents an Elizabethan version of the classical triumph, but it is also a pageant, a royal procession, and a ceremonial entry all at once. In the case of Elizabeth, the identification with Laura of Petrarch's *Triumph of Chastity* and its related iconography to commemorate the defeat of the *Armada*, has been crucial in creating the Elizabethan icon (Campbell 2007, 83). Alessandra Petrina (2020), among others, has examined how Petrarch, a key source for triumphal forms in the Renaissance, drew inspiration from the Roman triumph. He transformed this classical motif into a medium for philosophical reflection rather than mere military celebration. Similarly, medieval cultural practices like English miracle plays paralleled the triumph in their processional nature. These plays involved linear movements with processions and featured various stations where spectators paused to watch performances, blending elements of religious drama with the ceremonial aspects of triumphal processions (Sticca 1990). Traditions of civic celebrations in England, before and after Elizabeth, use the word triumph in a very comprehensive

way – such as The Lord Mayor’s show of 1605, called *The Triumph of Reunited Britannia*, a civic ceremony paid by the Merchant Taylors’ Company to celebrate the election of the Mayor but intended as praise for King James as well (Wright 1988), or The Lord Mayor’s show of 1612, Thomas Dekker’s *Troia-Nova Triumphans* (Bergeron 1998, 170). Classical inspiration was obvious in the setting of arches for these royal or civic entries.

The intrinsic hybridity of the form can be seen in Bacon’s essay “Of Masques and Triumphs” in which private entertainments at court (masques) are assimilated to Triumphs – he describes them as “toys, to come amongst such serious observations” (1612/1972, 115) and adds that “since princes will have such things, it is better they should be graced with elegancy, than daubed with cost” (115). The essay focuses essentially on court masques – only the last few sentences mention jousts (tournaments) and barriers, and the way challengers make their entries in chariots pulled by exotic beasts. The essay ends dismissively albeit consistently with the words “But enough of these toys” (1612/1972, 116). In this essay the notion of triumph as military procession has been replaced by the spectacular and expensive expressions of royal vanity – and indeed these triumphal forms (entries, pageants, masques, processions) in the Renaissance, celebrating the monarch as hero, narrow the focus to the celebration of a dynasty and a nation. Ritual, spectacle, parade, be they the horizontal progression of people and situations on the page or on the stage, or the carefully negotiated crossing of a triumphal arch, all create what Stephen Orgel (1975) in his seminal monograph has called “The Illusion of Power”, the fictional transposition of a military victory into the Machiavellian, highly spectacular, cult of the ruler.

2. *Spectacles of absence: The Military Triumph as Unfulfilled Promise*

The literary military triumphs that I am going to examine, as a procession of texts from Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606) back to Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* (1587-1588), a chronologically backwards pageant with a coda on the last Stuart kings and the masques that celebrated them, are almost never realized onstage. The triumph eludes reality: as a memory, aspiration, or foreboding it intertwines with the ceremonial language of masque-like entertainments, incorporating martial valour into theatrical spectacle. This is precisely what happens in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Unsurprisingly, allusions to military triumphs in Shakespeare are main-

ly to be found in the History plays and the Roman plays. One could argue that this play is obsessed, almost, with the image of the triumph, although the only actual triumph that we see on stage, Ventidius' victorious (on the Parthians) entrance at the beginning of the third act, with the stage direction "Enter Ventidius as it were in triumph, the dead body of Pacorus borne before him" (it is ironic that the only scene of an actual triumph in this play would be omitted by most productions, Wilders 1995, 171) is immediately undermined first by the evocation of a future, better or proper, triumph ("SILIUS: So thy grand captain Antony / Shall set thee on triumphant chariots and / Put garlands on thy head" 3.1.9-11) and then by the general's worry that his victory might overshadow Antony ("I could do more to do Antonius good / But 'twould offend him, and in his offence / Should my performance perish" 3.1.25-28). As I have anticipated, in the play triumphal imagery refers to "the promise of triumphs to come and reports of triumph past" (Jackson 1984, 133), but rarely describes the staging of an actual triumph. The word "performance" used by Ventidius is appropriate as it evokes the theatrical and especially metatheatrical potential of the triumph on the Jacobean stage. One only needs to think of Cleopatra as "a most triumphant lady" in Maecenas' words (2.2.195) and the famous description of her pose as Venus in the barge like a burnished throne, surrounded by her gentlewomen "like the Nereides, so many mermaids" (2.2.216-217), which suggests similar arrangements of mythological characters in Jacobean masques (Nevo 1967 argues convincingly that the play is replete with masque and antimasque imagery). Or Caesar's memory (or hearsay, or fantasy, as he was not present) of Cleopatra having been crowned in Alexandria "in th' habiliments of the goddess Isis" (3.6.13). This fleeting reference to a triumphant coronation will be undermined shortly after by Cleopatra's future (and famous) evocation of endless debased repetition of that event on the stage:

The quick comedians
 Extemporally will stage us and present
 Our Alexandrian revels; Antony
 Shall be brought drunken forth; and I shall see
 Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
 I'th' posture of a whore (5.2.215-219).

The rest of the references to triumphs concern Cleopatra being paraded as a slave in Caesar's triumph – starting from the fantasy in which Antony dreams of killing her to deprive Caesar of the pleasure of leading her in chains ("Van-

ish, or I shall give thee thy deserving / And blemish Caesar's triumph. Let him take thee / And hoist thee up to the shouting plebeians" 4.12.32-34). Cleopatra herself voices the fear of becoming part of Caesar's triumph – an ordeal she describes as a nightmare of inevitable humiliation. Through what Nevo calls an "incremental refrain" (1967, 112), she tantalizes the audience with the prospect of a spectacle that will never come to pass. This refrain ranges from her promise to kneel at Caesar's feet (3.13.78-80), to her imagining herself as a jewel: "not th'imperious show / Of the full-fortun'd Caesar ever shall / Be brooch'd with me" (4.15.24-26), an ornament meant to adorn his Roman victory. In Act 5 Cleopatra will evoke a scene of further degradation:

Know, sir, that I
Will not wait pinioned at your master's court,
Nor once be chastised with the sober eye
Of dull Octavia. Shall they hoist me up
And show me to the shouting varletry
Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt
Be gentle grave unto me! Rather on Nilus' mud
Lay me stark naked, and let the water-flies
Blow me into abhorring! Rather make
My country's high pyramides my gibbet
And hang me up in chains. (5.2.52-60)

These are indeed, as Proculeius remarks, "thoughts of horror": "You do extend / These thoughts of horror further than you shall / Find cause in Caesar" (5.2.61). Cleopatra imagines herself displayed like "an Egyptian puppet" surrounded by the "thick breath" of "mechanical slaves with greasy aprons" (5.2.206) – a vision that, incidentally, evokes a rather accurate image of some of the more typical members of the Globe audience. Yet neither Renaissance 'greasy mechanicals' nor modern spectators ever witness the spectacle of Cleopatra in chains. As we know, the Egyptian queen takes her own life rather than submit to such humiliation. Her position as a vanquished monarch in Caesar's triumph exists only in her imagination – a terrifying illusion that never becomes reality. This anxiety about public humiliation and posthumous reputation is a lasting obsession that haunts Shakespeare's rulers. As James Shapiro (2015) notes, *Antony and Cleopatra* was likely written in 1606, immediately after *Macbeth*, during a period when Shakespeare was returning – perhaps from

memory – to North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Life of Antony*, a source he had previously used for *Julius Caesar*. In *Macbeth* 3.1, the title character compares his relationship with Banquo to that of Mark Antony and Caesar: “Whose being I do fear; and under him / My genius is rebuked, as it is said / Mark Antony’s was by Caesar” (3.1.55-58). As Shapiro asks, what is a medieval Scottish king doing paraphrasing Plutarch and identifying with Antony? (267).

This unexpected comparison – and the use of a classical source rather than a Chronicle – invites deeper reflection. In Act 5, Scene 7 of *Macbeth*, Macduff demands that Macbeth surrender: “and live to be the show and gaze o’th’ time” (5.7.54). Macbeth refuses: “I will not yield / To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet, / And to be baited with the rabble’s curse” (5.7.58-59). Like Cleopatra, Macbeth fears the humiliation of being publicly displayed and scorned by the masses – an indignity both characters choose to avoid through death. Macbeth, like the Egyptian queen, despises the crowd that would jeer at his downfall just as she imagines being surrounded by “mechanical slaves with greasy aprons”. This is, again, a triumph denied to the rabble who pay to see the fall of rulers on the stage of the Globe. And yet, it is Cleopatra – not Caesar, and Macbeth – not Malcolm – who lingers in the cultural imagination, triumph or no triumph. In *Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2, Caesar correctly suspects that Cleopatra will take her own life, thus robbing him of the opportunity to parade her through the streets of Rome:

Give her what comforts
The quality of her passion shall require,
Lest, in her greatness, by some mortal stroke
She do defeat us. *For her life in Rome*
Would be eternal in our triumph (5.2.62-66; my italics)

The Arden edition in a footnote cites Emrys Jones’s interpretation of the line in italics – “her presence alive in Rome in my triumph would make it famous for ever” (quoted in Wilders 1995, 275). But is that truly what the line conveys? It does not sound as though the Roman military triumph is what would be immortalized; rather, it is Cleopatra herself. This imagined, fantasized triumph seems less a celebration of Roman imperial power than a paradoxical glorification of the captive queen. Cleopatra, after all, is already endowed with an aura of eternal allure: “Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety” (2.2.245-46). By denying her presence in Caesar’s triumph, she performs

an anti-triumph – one that ensures the enduring legacy of the fantasy of the captive, rather than the reality of military conquest. After conjuring a series of triumphs that, like ghosts, never materialize – whether in history or on stage – it is the absent image of Cleopatra as captive that ultimately dominates the imagination, eclipsing the Roman victor and destabilizing the very notion of triumph itself.

For another Shakespearean negation of a triumph – or anti-triumph – we must go back to 1599, to *Henry V*, Shakespeare's most emphatically triumphal ruler. The Chorus (which, as we know, has a tendency to misrepresent events) introduces Act 5 by describing the king's return to London from the French campaign in terms evocative of a 'Conquering Caesar':

Behold, In the quick forge and working-house of thought,
How London doth pour out her citizens.
The mayor all his brethren in best sort,
Like to the senators o'th'antique Rome,
With the plebeians swarming at their heels,
Go forth and fetch their conqu'ring Caesar in:
As, by a lower but by loving likelihood,
Were now the general of our gracious empress,
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,
How many would the peaceful city quit
To welcome him! (5. 22-34)

The Chorus compares Henry to Caesar but also alludes – hopefully – to Essex's anticipated return from the Irish campaign. Caesar's triumph lies in the past; Essex's is projected into the future. Yet both triumphs are ultimately doomed, as these would-be triumphators, at the height of their popularity, are cut down by death after attempting acts perceived as usurpation. These military successes are tainted by hubris – something King Henry, within the play, avoids by doing the very opposite of what Cleopatra fears: instead of being elevated above the crowd, he mixes freely with the "rabble" and the "shouting plebeians" in Eastcheap taverns rather than the grand avenues of Rome. This inclusive, populist gesture recalls his father, Bolingbroke, returning from exile in *Henry IV*, Part 1 – technically a usurper like Essex, but a humble one, capable of winning over the hearts of the common people:

With humble and familiar courtesy;
What reverence he did throw away on slaves
 Wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles (1.4. 25-28)

A decadent, exotic barge or masque-like burnished thrones stand in stark contrast to a plain English bonnet raised in salute to an oyster-wench. The deconstruction of the military triumph in *Henry V* is fully realized after the Battle of Agincourt, when the king repeatedly attributes the astounding victory not to his own prowess, but to divine intervention:

Oh God, thy arm was here!
And not to us, but to Thy arm alone,
Ascribe we all! [...]
Take it, God,
For it is none but Thine! (4.8.109-110; 114)

In a Roman triumph, a slave would stand behind the emperor on the chariot, whispering "*Memento homo*" ("Remember you are only a man") – a sobering reminder of human mortality (Payne 1962, 41). Henry redefines the concept of triumph not in imperial or pagan terms but in Christian ones, following a tradition initiated by Emperor Constantine. Aside from the symbolic 'spoils of war' in the form of the French princess Katherine, Henry's triumph is marked by humility and piety rather than spectacle and domination (Miller 2001, 24).

Henry V was staged in 1599, another pivotal year in which Shakespeare continues his reimagining – if not outright inversion – of the classical military triumph. That same year, he wrote *Julius Caesar*, a play alluded to in the Chorus of *Henry V*. In *Julius Caesar*, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, triumphs are largely evoked in retrospect. Marullus recalls Pompey's past glories and the rapturous response of the Roman people when they merely glimpsed "his chariot but appear," and how their "universal shout" made the Tiber "tremble underneath her banks" (1.1.44-45). This memory is the play's first – and arguably most potent – evocation of triumph: not a present spectacle, but a figment of the past. As Miller notes (2001, 130), the soothsayer's warning to "Beware the Ides of March" casts him in the role of the traditional attendant who, during a Roman triumph, reminded the victor of his mortality. Is Caesar's refusal of the crown a political performance – an act of restraint – or a sign of vulnerability from a man who, by his own admission, swoons and chokes when exposed to "the

rabblement,” their “sweaty night caps,” and “stinking breath” (1.2.337, 339). This is, essentially, Cleopatra’s nightmare refigured in Republican Rome. As in *Antony and Cleopatra*, we never witness Caesar’s triumph; not even the play that bears his name grants him that spectacle. From the opening scene onward, the very notion of triumph is questioned and destabilized:

COBBLER: ...we make holiday to see Caesar, and rejoice in his triumph.

MARCUS ANTONIUS: What conquest brings he home?

What tributary follow him to Rome,

To grace in captive bonds his chariot-wheels? (1.1. 30-34)

Apart from Caesar’s hubris, victory in a civil war does not align with the traditional conventions of triumphal representation. Unlike Pompey, Caesar cannot stage such a procession. To the group of defeated rulers who would rather die than be led in triumph – Cleopatra and Macbeth – we can also add Brutus, “For a defeated Roman to be led in triumph by another Roman is a disgrace that the man of honour cannot accept” (D’Amico 1992, 69):

CASSIUS: Then if we lose this battle,

You are contented to be led in triumph

Thorough the streets of Rome?

BRUTUS: No, Cassius, no. Think not, thou noble Roman,

That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome;

He bears too great a Mind.

(5.1.107-12)

3. *Victories in Transit, Triumphs Transitory*

Is the conspirators’ ceremonial murder, bathing hands in the blood of a past triumphator, the only equivalent of a military triumph that can be shown on stage? A similar interplay of the funereal and triumphant marks Shakespeare’s earlier Roman play, *Titus Andronicus*, staged in the early 1590s. In this play, General Titus’s triumph is inextricably tied to the burial of his sons. Indeed, the entire first act unfolds near the Andronici family tomb, a setting that underscores how sacrifice and honour, barbarity and civility, are disturbingly intertwined and not neatly divided between the defeated Goths and the victorious

Romans. Tamora, the captured and vanquished Queen of the Goths, brought to Rome to ‘beautify’ Titus’s triumphs and then ‘return captive’ to Roman rule – a fate Cleopatra would later evade – unexpectedly becomes the bride of the new young Emperor Saturninus. Consequently, the general’s triumph morphs into another burial, his glory transforming into disgrace. Meanwhile, the enslaved Tamora ascends to become Empress, riding in the Emperor’s chariot in a mocking subversion of the conventions governing the Roman triumph.

According to Green (1989, 317) Shakespeare introduces Titus as a Roman Tamburlaine and the Moor Aaron borrows his flamboyant rhetoric and vaunting bravado from the Scythian emperor and conqueror – it is as if Tamburlaine’s style were easily adopted by Shakespeare’s histrionic villains (Charney 1997, 216). The violent, barbaric refashioning of the Roman triumph in *Titus Andronicus* reaches an extreme in the seriality that characterizes Tamburlaine’s exploits in Marlowe’s earlier play. Much like Queen Tamora in *Titus*, Zenocrate – the daughter of the Soldan of Egypt – is a spoil of war who eventually marries her conqueror, Tamburlaine. Marlowe’s play, presumably written in the late 1580s, anticipates the paradoxes of triumph that Shakespeare would later explore. In this drama of the invincible Scythian conqueror, victories are expressed both through action and through pyrotechnic verbal displays: dazzling catalogues of conquests, collections of crowns, and vivid depictions of horror. Yet Tamburlaine’s military prowess is far from universally admired. Other characters consistently describe him as a thief of low birth: “a sturdy Scythian thief” (1.1.36), “a Scythian shepherd” (1.2.155), “a sturdy felon and a base-born thief” (4.3.12), and one whose crown lies “under yoke and thralldom of a thief” (5.2.197). A nomadic war-machine, Tamburlaine believes that valour alone will elevate him: “I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove, / And yet a shepherd by my parentage” (1.2.33–34). His triumphs are always in transit, so to speak, as he moves from nation to nation, hungry for more lands to conquer, dragging enslaved kings and queens in cages as part of his perpetual procession. The fates of Bajazeth, King of Turkey, and his wife Zabina – tortured, starved, and relentlessly humiliated – embody the very terror that will later haunt Cleopatra and Brutus. This is what awaits those who do not take their own lives before being vanquished and paraded in triumph. Tamburlaine’s captives ultimately choose death by smashing their heads against the bars of their cages – an act that underscores the savagery of his conquests.

The ‘shepherd thief’s’ geographic path of triumphs eventually reaches cosmological proportions, expressed in his desire: “We will triumph over all the world. /

I hold the Fates' bounds fast in iron chains / And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel" (1.2.172-174). What triumph could be more absolute than one that conquers the Fates, destiny, and the future itself? Tamburlaine's triumphal pageantry checks many boxes of the Roman military triumph: the victories, the processions of animals and captives, even a version of the memento mori traditionally whispered by an attendant behind the emperor – here reframed as the personification of Death itself in his imagination: "See where my slave, the ugly monster Death [...] stands aiming at me with his murdering dart, / Who flies away at every glance I give, / And when I look away comes stealing on" (Part 2, 5.3.67ff.). Yet what ultimately undermines the triumphal rhetoric of Tamburlaine is the simple fact that he has no nation behind him. He has an army; he collects crowns (Tran 2020), but he remains a nomad, hailing from a country of nomads (Miller 2001, 92). His triumphs are never a communal enterprise. As Payne writes in his book on Roman triumphs:

An observer in Rome, watching the procession pass by, might be pardoned if he thought that the Roman people were celebrating the conqueror: in fact they were celebrating themselves. They rejoiced in their victory, incarnate in the figure of conqueror, and they saw in this earthly procession intimations of divine blessing (1962, 10).

At a time when England was trying to conceptualize itself as a (often paradoxical) nation (Helgerson 1995), who exactly are the people celebrating with Tamburlaine? What nations? He dies without ever triumphing at home – but home is precisely where one returns to be celebrated, the privileged setting for a triumph: "The Roman triumph bears home the riches of the wide world; Tamburlaine disperses himself among them" (Miller 2001, 92). His hope of riding "through Samarcanda streets" in his native city until his soul, "dissevered from their flesh, / Shall mount the milk-white way" (Part 2, 4.3.115, 125), is yet another fantasy. The Scythian thief who has conquered half the world cannot come home to triumph. His empire expands through constant accumulation of new territories – such an empire 'in progress' cannot have a centre or a capital in which to stage a triumph. Tamburlaine can only celebrate himself as an exile.

4. Peace Triumphant and Royal Dreams

The paradox of a triumphator unable to triumph at home – a foreigner to the people and nation celebrating him – oddly anticipates the English crowds wel-

coming a foreign king triumphing through the streets of London. A few years after Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* had depicted a triumphator abroad, King James I of England and VI of Scotland entered the City of London in 1604 not as a conqueror of enemies accompanied by a train of prisoners, but as a new, foreign king – a Scot – taking possession of English soil. Two countries, Scotland and England, were joined into Britain in an imperialist mode meant to revive the splendour of Roman Britannia. As has been noted, “the old legends of the Trojan foundation of Britain took on new vigour with the accession of James” (Parry 1981, 8-9). Seven triumphal arches were erected, adorned with elaborate allegorical programs, allusive iconography, and dense emblematic meaning: the city itself was transformed into a kind of masque requiring sophisticated interpretive skills. The playwrights Ben Jonson and Thomas Dekker composed the poetic speeches, and Stephen Harrison, the architect, produced engravings of the arches. This king did not lead foreign captives in his procession (though there was a parade of foreign ambassadors, who hardly qualified as spoils of war); instead, two foreign communities in London – the Italian and the Dutch – erected their own arches in homage to the new king.

And yet, once again, James's triumph was a paradox and an illusion – which did not celebrate military achievements but, rather, praised the new king as a peaceful, rather than a martial, ruler. James's motto was *Beati pacifici* – the iconography of the arches hailed James as a new Augustus whose ideal of good government (in a court notorious for extreme favouritism) was constantly identified with the theme of peace. James's triumphal entry into London did not only relocate the Roman military triumph in the direction of peace; it also exposed the transient nature of these ephemeral architectures. Unlike the solid materials (such as marble) with which the Roman arches were made, meant to last and record victories for posterity, the spectacular London arches were made of wood and plaster, ready to be taken down shortly after the occasion, impermanent albeit magnificent theatrical props, not unlike the machinery employed for court masques.

James's son Charles I appropriated the ideal of the peaceful monarch and cultivated the masque as triumphal form. As Butler argues, with this ideological agenda, “the Caroline masque reinvented itself as the triumph” (2009, 287), and especially in the 1630s, the decade of Charles's absolute rule, many masque titles included the word ‘triumph’: Ben Jonson's *Love's Triumph through Calipolis* (1631); Aurelian Townshend's *Albion's Triumph* (1632); William Dave-

nant's *Triumph of the Court d'Amour* (1636) and *Britannia Triumphant* (1638); James Shirley's *The Triumph of Peace* (1634).

As with James's royal entry, triumph in these masques is not to be understood in a military sense, but rather in a broader, symbolic one: 1) as praise for the king, representing heroic virtue and perfect (and therefore unchallengeable) political authority, and 2) as a defence of Charles's various political actions. The celebration of Charles as the embodiment of Virtue, and his wife, Queen Henrietta Maria, as the embodiment of Divine Beauty – united in the *Carlomaria* image of Neoplatonic perfection – is central to all these masques. In Jonson's masque, *Ideal Love* triumphs in *Callipolis* (the city of beauty and an allegory of Charles's court) over other forms of debased love:

Beauty and Love, whose story is mysteriall,
In yonder Palme-tree, and the Crowne imperiall,
Doe from the Rose, and Lilly so delicious,
Promise a shade, shall ever be propitious
To both the Kingdomes. (Jonson 1631/1969, 461).

In Townshend's *Albion's Triumph*, the entry of the virtuous King Albanactus – a votary of Queen Alba in Albipolis (a name that is structurally and phonetically reminiscent of Callipolis from Jonson's play the year before) – reframes the idea of triumph first as a conquest of love (in which the conqueror becomes the conquered), and then as the merging of the ideal world of virtue with the real world of the Court. Concord, Justice, Religion, and Peace have descended from the heavens and taken up residence in Britain. King Albanactus, dressed as a Roman emperor, triumphs not for military conquest, but for the virtue of his mind:

A triumph: mighty as the man designed
To wear those bays, heroic as his mind,
Just as his actions, glorious as his reign,
And like his virtues, infinite in train (quoted in Parry 1981, 190)

Similarly, in Davenant's *The Triumph of the Court d'Amour*, Cupid urges, "now you must resign to love / your warlike hearts," as the military masquers are transformed into "a troop of noble lovers" (quoted in Parry 1981, 197).

Charles I, a keen art collector, was deeply aware of the power of art to celebrate and legitimize monarchical authority. In 1629, he commissioned Rubens to decorate the ceiling of the Banqueting House at Whitehall, the London residence of the

king, with a heavenly apotheosis of James I and the Stuart dynasty. But his most remarkable acquisition came two years earlier with the purchase of Mantegna's nine canvases of *The Triumphs of Julius Caesar* (1486-1492) (fig. 2, detail), which arrived in England in 1629-1630. Clearly, Charles was intent on cultivating an association with Caesar's military victories and, by extension, with the Gonzaga family's legacy – an attempt, as Miller argues, to translate “the prestige of martial and imperial Romanitas from the house of Gonzaga to the house of Stuart” (2001, 122). Yet at the same time, Charles continued to pursue in his masques an iconography centred on peace and love. His ‘triumph’ could hardly resemble the actual return of a Roman general from military victory; the association with a Roman emperor was a fantasy, a role to be performed – heroic yet fleeting and ultimately untenable.

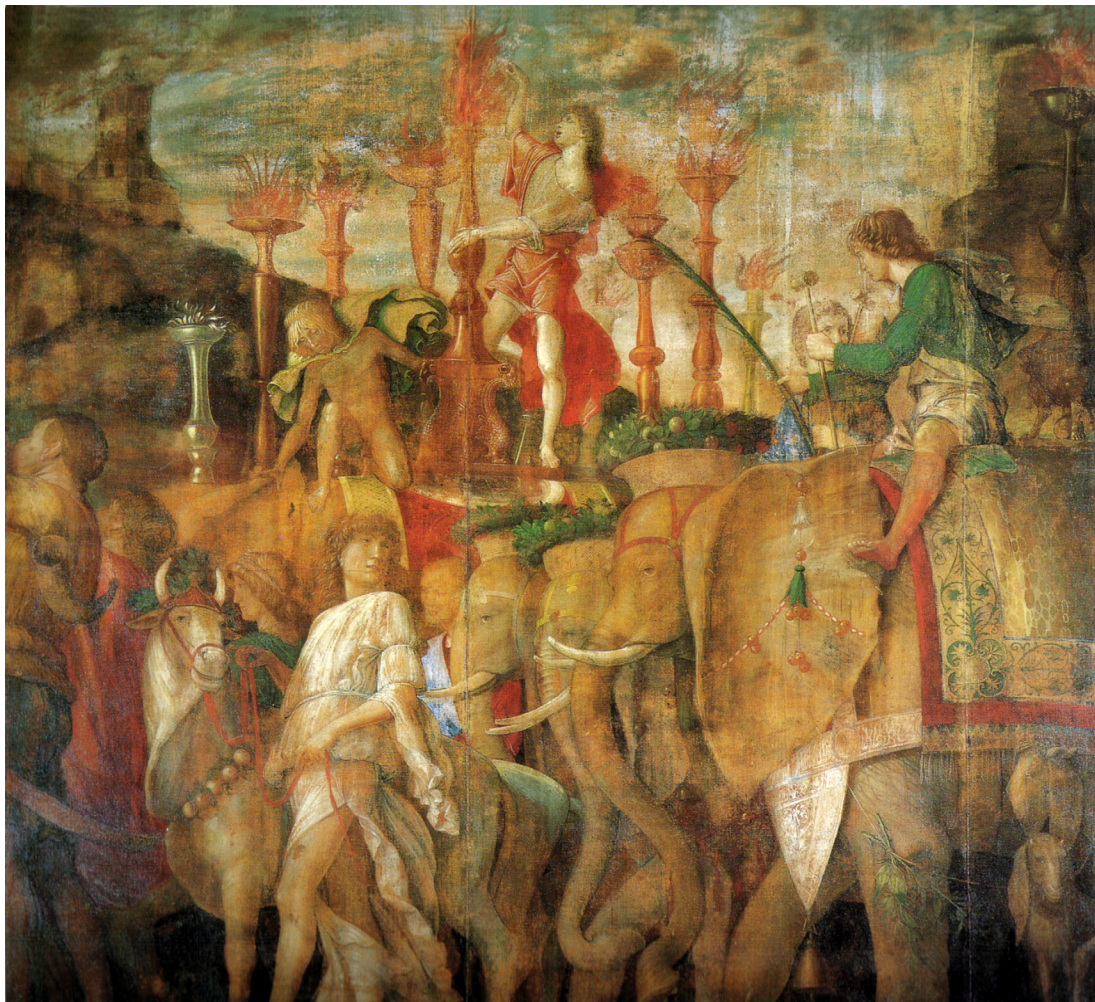


Figure 2.

Charles's claim to imperial authority and political success stood in stark contrast to his domestic failures and poor record in foreign policy. His triumph was both a mask and a masque – an imperial pose, much like the one he strikes in Van Dyck's famous painting *Charles I on Horseback with M. de Saint Antoine* (fig. 3) (completed in 1633, during the decade of his personal rule and the triumphalist masques). In this portrait, as in others by Van Dyck, Charles is shown on horseback – an easy allusion to Roman emperors, revived in the Renaissance (as in Titian's *Charles V*). The painting was displayed at the end of a gallery at St James's Palace, alongside portraits of Roman emperors (Parry 1981, 222).



Figure 3.

In the painting, Charles rides through a triumphal arch – not into a city, but into a palace. He is alone, accompanied only by his riding master, who looks up at him from below, as do we, the viewers. This attendant is in no position to remind the king that he is mortal; he is most emphatically *not* the whispering slave of the Roman triumph. Unlike the communal celebration depicted in the painting of Elizabeth and her court that opened this article – where the monarch is surrounded by subjects in the streets – this king reigns in isolation: no court, no cheering crowds, no vanquished enemies. As Miller aptly puts it, “Disburdened of friends and foes alike, the king reigns in god-like remoteness” (2001, 123).

The triumph of this martial hero is a role, like that of Albanactus entering the *Callipolis* or *Albipolis* of the masque – imaginary cities of beauty and heroic love. Fictions, projections, spectacles. In only a few years’ time, Charles I will be executed – a final triumph of death. In the remoteness of this idealized vision, which both undermines and deconstructs the very notion of military triumph, we find the most extreme version of the spectacular transience that defines representations of the military triumph in the key texts of early modern English theatrical culture. Ultimately, the analysis of these theatrical rewritings of the Roman triumph in early modern England reveals an ambivalent fascination with the celebration of military victory. From Cleopatra imagining her humiliating procession to Tamburlaine, whose nomadic empire knows no true triumphal ‘homecoming’, to the peaceful and symbolic re-elaborations of triumphs in the Stuart masques, we witness a progressive dematerialization of the triumph as a concrete military event. Charles I, acutely aware of art’s legitimizing power, consciously cultivated an association with Roman imperial victory through acquisitions like Mantegna’s *Triumphs*, while simultaneously staging masques that celebrated peace. His triumph, much like the solitary and idealized depiction in Van Dyck’s equestrian portrait entering a palatial triumphal arch, became a performed role that stood in stark contrast to his political realities. The very notion of military triumph is thus deconstructed, ultimately becoming a fiction, a projection, a spectacle – a triumph, indeed, made of the same stuff as royal dreams, destined to fade like the ephemeral architectures of power.

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