Staging the Prince Royal: Henry, Prince of Wales and the Theater of Royal Shipbuilding

Gregory Vaughn McNamara, Ph.D.
Professor of English
Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences
Clayton State University
Morrow, GA 30260, USA

Abstract

Among the many and varied forms of political theatre characterizing the emergent court of Henry Frederick Stuart, the eldest son of King James I who was created Prince of Wales in June 1610, shipbuilding was in some ways the most elaborate. Scholarship has understandably tended to concentrate on the Prince's interest in the court masque and his patronage of Ben Jonson, who built a distinctive mythos around the young man in such ceremonial works as Prince Henry's Barriers and Oberon, the Faerie Prince. Prince Henry was influenced by the naval theories and practices of Sir Walter Ralegh and he patronized the controversial shipbuilder Phineas Pett—these men contributed to the political and nautical predilections that led to his adoption of the motto "He delights to go upon the deep." This essay examines the construction of the three-master flagship Prince Royal as a significant expression of the highly theatrical early Stuart court, with Prince Henry's childhood and adolescent involvement in maritime pursuits as the framing narrative to the analysis.

Keywords*:* Stuart England, Shipbuilding, Court Culture, Prince Henry, Phineas Pett

1. Introduction

From his baptism until his death, ships and shipping were central to the mythos surrounding James I's ill-fated eldest son, Henry, Prince of Wales. The 1594 baptismal celebration at King James's newly expanded Stirling Castle presented in the infant prince's honor a tableau of "a most sumpteous and wel proportioned Shippe the length of her keele, was 18 foot and her breadth 8 foot from her bottom to her highest flagge was 40 foote [with an artificial sea beneath]" (Fowler, Sig C2). In the fore stern of the ship rode a personation of Neptune "having in his hand a trident, and on his head a crown, his apparrel was all of Indian Cloth of silver and silk" (Fowler, Sig, C2). This tableau illustrated the high expectations for James's eventual succession to the English throne and his anticipated governance over one of the world's foremost naval powers, a power that the gold-adorned royal infant laid on a blanket embroidered with images of Hercules would stand heir to. The exotic imagery and colonial hubris of the spectacle was punctuated in no mean way by the "the Cannons of the Castell," which "roared, that therwith the earth trembled," and the resounding gunfire of three great ships lying in the "roade neere by" (Fowler, Sig. C, C4).

Although Henry was only months old at this juncture, this early childhood experience constituted a significant moment of myth making and was one of the many grandiose events fashioning the real and perceived identity of this prince with a penchant for the sea. Indeed, there were sufficient courtly pageants, portraits, habits of dress, and maritime projects reflecting this nautical emphasis that by 1610 Henry adopted the personal motto "He delights to go upon the deep" (Williamson, Ch. 3; Hole, 1612; Strong, 1986, Plate 90; Christy, 1894). Recognizing that the prince's identity was consistently fashioned and represented within this maritime context, this discussion sets out to elaborate on that theme and explore some of the political implications of his nautical pursuits, particularly the highly theatrical construction and presentation of his namesake vessel, the Prince Royal.

2. Methodology

In keeping with recent trends in early modern studies this essay reflects an historicist approach with attention to context as well as text and with perhaps more consideration given to examination of primary than to secondary sources.

The texts under enquiry, indeed are the primary sources describing the theatre of shipbuilding surrounding Henry, Prince of Wales from his birth until his death—such sources are plentiful and highly descriptive, ranging from William Fowler's account of the Prince's baptismal festivities to the autobiography of the shipwright Phineas Pett. The essence of the methodology exhibited here is to weave a narrative combining the historical record with contemporary criticism on the subject of performance and theatre at court such that the great ship Prince Royal emerges as yet another theatrical context in which the Prince was celebrated and in which he performed as he moved toward the festivities for his creation as Prince of Wales in 1610.

3. The Disdain

By the time he reached adolescence and young adulthood, Henry's naval affairs were a natural extension of the chivalric principles and expansionist dreams the young man idealized and practiced on land. Seaborne navigation promised advanced warfare, increased trade, and a vehicle for Protestant ideology; the prince was no casual observer of naval affairs. Along these lines, Roy Strong has suggested that the prince perceived "a mighty navy" to be "the vanguard of the new Protestant chivalry of England bearing across the seas the light of the Gospel to the new horizons" (Strong 60). The prince's association and patronage of the shipwright Phineas Pett and regular correspondence with the imprisoned Sir Walter Ralegh were important sources of his naval education and enthusiasm for maritime pursuits; Ralegh himself wrote several treatises addressing the politics of seafaring that were intended to shape Prince Henry's maritime consciousness and compel him to maintain and advance an aggressive position in foreign policy. Ralegh's A Discourse of the Invention of Ships, for example, is based on the imperial principle that "the forces of princes by sea . . . 'are marks of the greatness of an estate,' for whosoever commands the sea commands trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself" (Ralegh, 325).

Immediately following James's ascension in 1603, the Lord Admiral, Charles Howard, employed Phineas Pett to construct a small ship for Henry's "instruction in the business of shipping and sailing, for which he afterwards showed a strong inclination" (Birch 39). When the ship was presented, the prince, the Lord Admiral, and a small group of attendant nobility "immediately weighed and [sailed] down as far as Paul's Wharf, under both top-sails and foresail, and there coming to anchor, his Highness, in the usual form, baptised the ship with a great bowl of wine, giving her the name of Disdain" (Birch 40). The prince had studied his naval history: nearly two decades earlier, Lord Admiral Howard had initiated conflict against the Spanish fleet with "an 80-ton barque, appropriately named Disdain, which dashed to within hailing distance of the Armada's main battle and fired a derisory token shot into its towering midst" (Martin and Parker, 165; 227-50). Thus the impressionable prince, himself christened in a maritime context, christened his own first ship, and the Lord Admiral and his peers fostered continuity in the exercise of maritime chivalry across the threshold from the Elizabethan reign into the Jacobean establishment, at least in small part, through twelve-year old Prince Henry's Disdain.

4. Phineas Pett's Grand Project

It was four years later when Phineas Pett, by this time a subject of the prince's household, was again commissioned to build a ship under the auspices of Prince Henry's authority (Strong 57). On this occasion it was no small craft but the flagship Prince Royal, the construction of which constituted perhaps the grandest sustained spectacle orchestrated in honor of Prince Henry. Pett unveiled his elaborate model of the ship at the prince's palace at Richmond on November 12, 1607 (Birch 80). The Lord Admiral, aware of the qualities of entertainment and technological curiosity the event would entail, "unknown to Mr. Pett, and with a view to do him service, had already informed the King of this model, and prevailed upon him to take a journey from Whitehall to Richmond, on purpose to view it" (Birch 80). This is yet another instance in which Lord Admiral Howard seems to have been quite consciously grooming the prince for future maritime pursuits.

Shortly after three o'clock in the afternoon the model was revealed, "adorned with carving and painting, and placed in a frame, arched, covered, and curtained with crimson taffety" (Birch 80). This arched and curtained framework—a structure combining the qualities of a stage and a picture frame—formed a modest maritime theater through which Pett gave prologue to the qualities of the proposed ship before his royal patrons. The display was apparently a success, as full-scale construction began in the following year.

It is important to note that Pett's presentation—his performance, as it were—might be profitably interpreted as an event parallel to the lavish court masques at Whitehall in which Prince Henry and the royal family were both celebrated and instructed. In this particular case, the Lord Admiral seems to have succeeded in fashioning a performance in which the king was not only to see the model ship but perhaps more importantly to see the prince see the model of a craft that that was ultimately to represent his own emergent majesty in maritime form.

5. Staging the Prince Royal

By the summer of 1608, Pett and his crew had successfully laid the new ship's keel and the master shipwright was fully engaged in the panegyrics of royal spectacle. Shortly after the groundwork was laid, Prince Henry began visiting the dockyard regularly to assess the progress and inspect the existing fleet. This process of visitation and inspection marked a convergence of Henry's scientific interest in the technical points of naval construction with what might be understood as his own need or will to engage in a mimetic process that was significant to his self-fashioning and identity formation. (Greenblatt, 1987). As the ship took its form and began to perform in its function as a state symbol, so too did Prince Henry. This symbolic linkage was apparent in the occasional entertainments that Pett organized to display the ship.

Such an entertainment occurred on August 13, 1608, when the prince first visited the Woolwich dockyard to assess the ship's newly laid foundations. Following the prince's arrival by barge and a brief reception, Pett led the prince to the topmost rear—or poop—deck of the Queen's namesake vessel, Royal Anne, where the best view of the new ship was to be had. The arrangement of audience and principal performers in this spectacle was not unlike the highly structured seating arrangements typical of the court masque, in which the monarch was afforded the best perspective on the show but was also seated in a location where he could best be seen.

Stephen Orgel has been perhaps the most effective communicator of this concept, arguing that when the king brought his players to court the nature of the audience changed, as, often, did the function of the performance. Now there were, properly speaking, two audiences and two spectacles. The primary audience was the monarch . . . what the rest of the spectators watched was not a play but the [monarch] at a play, and their response would have been not simply to the drama, but to the relationship between the drama and its primary audience, the royal spectator. (Orgel, 9)

In this comparative context, it is perhaps easier to apprehend the gravity with which Pett, leading the prince aboard the Royal Anne, communicated "how great a satisfaction it would be to all the seamen to perceive his Highness so well affected to the navy" (Brich 90). It is apparent that Pett's construction of this layered performance incorporated two areas of central focus and at least two principal audiences. The Prince Royal itself and the workers attending it comprised one stage and scene, while aboard the Royal Anne, Prince Henry, Pett, and the officers of the dockyard formed another. Just as the prince himself was one audience, having come to see the ship, a much larger audience—or group of audiences—was present to see him see it.

The layered performance of Prince Henry's inspection of the Prince Royal reveals Pett's mastery of spectacle in the arrangement of multiple tiers of performance and also in creating powerful moments of emphasis and smooth transitions throughout the events of the day. With the prince in full prospect of the ship and in view of those assembled at the dockyard, the spectacle intensified. Pett, anticipating this time, had arranged for a discharge of ordnance and gave a "secret signal" to William Bull, Master Gunner of England who upon the signal made gave fire to the train, and discharged the whole volley with such good order, as was highly satisfactory to the Prince, and the moreso, because it was unexpected. When ordnance ceased firing, Mr. Pett kneeled to his Highness, and requested him to accept this poor sea- entertainment as an unfeigned earnest of duty to him. (Birch 90)

Pett's "sea-entertainment" was apparently very much in line with the prince's tastes, which his biographer Sir Charles Cornwallis reports were well satisfied by "the sounding of the Trumpet, the beating of the Drumme, [and] the roaring of the Canon" (Cornwallis, Sig. A5v). This surprise spectacle shows us Pett the royal shipbuilder but also Pett the courtier and would-be theater man, increasingly extending his responsibilities from overseeing the design, measurement, and assembly of seagoing vessels to the arrangement of revels and entertainments. Following the discharging of ordnance and a technical demonstration involving the measurement of the ship's keel for the prince's pleasure, the entourage repaired to Pett's house, where a banquet was waiting (Williamson, 50-1). Feasts were, of course the usual manner of concluding an evening of revels at court such as a masque or play, so it was in this tradition that Pett concluded his own afternoon performance at Woolwich.

6. An Enquiry

The construction of the Prince Royal and its eventual deployment reflected the excitement and perhaps the excess of the period of Henry's creation and was to some degree panegyric gone awry. As both Prince Henry and Phineas Pett were well aware through their close relationships with him, Sir Walter Ralegh had written extensively on shipbuilding and specifically cautioned against the construction of a three-decker ship with far greater tonnage than was practical for swift and successful seaworthiness (Ralegh, 335-50). Despite this practical knowledge, Pett seems to have put form before function in designing the Prince Royal and the prince apparently did not question the project's going forward as such; to complicate matters further the integrity of both ship and shipbuilder came into question in 1609 and Pett was brought to trial (Nichols, 249-57).

Preemptory to the trial at Woolwich, Pett was called before the king at Whitehall, and the prince made a public show of opposition to the accusations brought against his servant by leading him by the hand through the park where many people could see them. This expression of patronage, Pett wrote, "was no little testimony of his principal care of me." "If I had been overthrown by the censure of his Majesty," Pett continues in his autobiography, "his highness had graciously determined to have received me into a place in his house, and resolved to have provided for me whilst I had lived" (Pett, 50). Even as Henry was extending his protection to Pett in this instance, I would also suggest that there was an element of self-preservation in his performance of opposition to those who questioned the soundness of the Prince Royal. The new ship had become closely tied to Henry's identity, and criticism of the project was tantamount to an attack on his own credibility.

During the trial itself, Pett was made to kneel before the king in a painful posture over an extended period of time but recorded that the prince continued to stand in his defense throughout the enquiry. "I was almost disheartened and out of breath," Pett wrote, "albeit the Prince's Highness, standing near me, from time to time encouraged me as far as he might without offense to his father, laboring to have me eased by standing up, but his majesty would not permit it" (Pett, 60). Pett's subservient posture was reflective of the tenuous status in which the trial positioned the further development of the Prince Royal.

The central event of the trial was the king's personal observation of the ship, which recalled Prince Henry's August 13, 1608 inspection. In the performance of this inspection, "[King James] desired the Lord Admiral to bring him to the sight of the work there in hand; which being done, directing his majesty to a brow or stage made at the stern of the ship, where he might take a perfect view of the whole ground-work of the frame" (Nichols 250). As in Henry's earlier inspection of the ship, the king's inspection was an elaborate performance before a large audience of concerned parties who watched intently as their lives and work hung in the balance. Following a series of measurements and calculations

His majesty, having received satisfaction of all things about the frame, repaired to the platform, attended with the Prince, Lords, and many thousand spectators besides . . . His majesty, with a loud voice, commanded the measurers to declare publicly the very truth; which when they had delivered clearly on our [Pett's] side, all the multitude heaved up their hats, and gave a great shout and acclamation. (Nichols 254)

Prince Henry, too, was triumphant, calling out "Where be now these perjured fellows that dare thus abuse his Majesty with these false informations, do they not worthily deserve hanging?" (Pett 62). The inquest, in Henry's mind, amounted to an abuse of majesty that should "worthily" be met with punishment by death. By this logic, the suggestion that the Prince Royal was inadequate was no less than a direct affront to the prince and his maritime court. With this spectacular justification, the Prince Royal was cleared for continued construction and Pett escaped further scrutiny and investigation (Williamson, 54). If the events of the trial enforced containment on Henry's emergent majesty to a certain degree, it was also an increasingly rare occasion in which the royal father and son enjoyed one another's approval (Bergeron, Royal Family).

7. A Noble Spectacle

The launch of the Prince Royal was a major function for the court, the prince, and Phineas Pett, whose discussion of the preparations for the launch and the accompanying ceremonies describes the flurry of activity at the dockyard, where attention was turned to the "stages" of the Prince Royal. The ship was ornamented with a "rich standard of taffety, very fairly gilt with gold, with his majesty's arms to be placed upon the poop, and a very large ensign of crimson rich taffety, with a canton of the Prince's crest, to be placed upon the quarter deck" (Pett, 79). The placement of these standards is suggestive of the perceived roles of the king and prince with regard to the ship.

The poop deck, where the king's arms were displayed, was the site ordinarily reserved for use on such occasions of display, where groups could be gathered for symbolic activities. The quarter deck, on the other hand, was a location ordinarily reserved for officers aboard ship and thus there was a quality of real authority beyond symbolic representation implied in the placement of the prince's standard in that location. This display was present in addition to more than £1300 worth of work—a vast sum—in painting, gilding, varnishing, and ornamentation recorded in Pett's records of payment (Pett, 207-10).

Despite the elaborate preparations made to launch the ship, however, the event did not proceed as expected. Queen Anna, Princess Elizabeth, and Prince Charles, along with their significant train of lords and ladies, assembled on the topmost decks with "the wind instruments by them, so that nothing was wanting to so great a royalty that could be desired" (Nichols 367). So it was that with expectation high the ship was grounded in a most anticlimactic fashion by a low tide and failed to launch, becoming stuck beyond immediate relief in the dock gates. The king, who was feeling "very ill at ease with a scouring, taken from surfeiting by eating grapes," "was much grieved at the frustrate of his expectation" and left Woolwich for Greenwich. Thus the noble spectacle turned fiasco, and, to borrow J.W. Williamson's sardonic phrasing, "all the great gentlemen of the realm climbed down off the ship and went home"—ladies too (Pett, 81). Prince Henry, undeterred but undoubtedly stunned and embarrassed, consulted with the Lord Admiral and others for a time and returned to Greenwich until after midnight, when he and his train rode back to Woolwich through a thunderstorm for a successful launch at high tide. Despite the abortion of the planned soiree aboard the new ship, the late-night launch did go off with significant ceremony:

His highness then, standing [on deck] with a selected company only, besides the trumpets, with a great deal of expression of princely joy, and with the ceremony of drinking in the standing cup, threw all the wine forward toward the half deck, and solemnly called her by the name of Prince Royal, the trumpets sounding all the while. (Pett, 83-4)

In many ways this event is representative of Henry's princely style. Under cover of night in the company of the select few whom he had chosen to accompany him across the heaths in the driving rain, this royal ceremony was a strangely private, photo-negative version of the event that had originally been planned. The garden party mood was transformed into ceremony by night with the spectral atmosphere of a reconnaissance mission. Although the ship still bore its standards of the king and prince, James was here the absent father and Prince Henry stood as the lone figure of majesty sailing into the darkness among his midnight peers.

The grand ship was finally ready for use and it was the most elaborate—though certainly not the trimmest—craft in the navy. But the representational power of the project was perhaps most fully realized in the process of its construction and emergence rather than in its actual completion. As a royal project contained within the context of courtly spectacle and majestic performance, the ship was a means for the expression of Henry's princely agency.

8. Conclusion

Although much necessary attention has been paid to the festivities, spectacles, and literary masterpieces created and presented in honor of Henry, Prince of Wales, particularly from his creation in 1610 until his death in 1612, the design, production and use of maritime technology, including Phineas Pett's Prince Royal, was a significant part of that political theatre. From its earliest stages of invention to its launch, the Prince Royal attracted the attention of the best minds in Jacobean warship design and was the continual subject of inspections and presentations which were ostentatious in their theatricality in addition to being charged with legal and politically partisan concerns. The Prince Royal clearly stands among the great stages of Prince Henry's period of investiture and also represents a significant intertwining of English naval history and the royal pageantry of the Jacobean era.

References

Primary Sources

Birch, T. (1760). The Life of Henry Prince of Wales. London.

Cornwallis, C. (1644). The Short Life and Much Lamented Death of that Most Magnanimous Prince, Henry, Prince of Wales. London.

Fowler, W. (1594). A True Reportarie of the most triumphant baptisme of Frederik Henry;Prince of Scotland. Edinburgh.

Nichols, J. (1828). The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First. (Vol. 2). London: J.B. Nichols.

Perrin, W. (1918). The Autobiography of Phineas Pett. Naval Records Society.

Ralegh, W. (1615). A Discourse of the Invention of Ships. In Oldys, W. (1829). The Works of Sir Walter Ralegh. New York: Burt Franklin.

Secondary Sources

Bergeron, D. (1991). Royal Family, Royal Lovers: King James of England and Scotland. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P.

Greenblatt, S. (1980). Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare. Chicago: U of Chicago P.

Martin, C. & Parker, J. (1988). The Spanish Armada. New York: Norton.

Orgel, S. (1975). The Illusion of Power. Berkeley: U of Cal P.

Strong, R.C. (1986). Henry, Prince of Wales and England's Lost Renaissance. London: Thames and Hudson.

Williamson, J.W. (1979). The Myth of the Conqueror. New York: AMS. Staging the Prince Royal 15