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# Francis Beaumont's *Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn, Gray's Inn and the Inner Temple* (1613)

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***SUMMARY:*** Beaumont's *Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn* was performed at Whitehall in February 1613 to celebrate the marriage of Princess Elizabeth and Frederick V. The essay explains the masque's cultural setting, linking Jacobean court spectacle to medieval mystery plays, morality drama, May Day customs, and classical mythology. Though written by Beaumont, it involved major figures such as Francis Bacon and Inigo Jones. Its allegory presents Thames and Rhine as the royal couple, honoured by Jupiter and Juno. The work mixes classical gods, rustic anti-masque dancers, and medieval knights, though James I reportedly grew sleepy.

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> "Peace and silence be the guide
> To the man and to the bride!
> If there be a joy yet new
> In marriage let it fall on you,
> That all the world may wonder!"
> ——Francis Beaumont, *The Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn* (1613)

## *INTRODUCTION*

The twentieth day of February, 1613, is a date which generally does not warrant much mention in any of the great histories of the early modern period. Six days earlier the country had been enjoying the festivities associated with the marriage, at Whitehall Palace, of Frederick V, Elector Palatine, to King James I's daughter Princess Elizabeth, though most of the festivities and celebrations occurred within the confines of the royal court, not without. What, then, could possibly explain the electric buzz that gripped London, drawing crowds in droves to the banks of the Thames on that day? Why was Whitehall Palace in a frenzy, its staff no doubt rushing back and forth in barely

contained panic? And what had compelled throngs of nobles and elegantly dressed ladies to wait, *willingly*, on a cold February evening, in long lines outside the palace gates?

It was, in fact, a very special occasion indeed, for at seven o'clock that evening masquers and a whole company of players—all attired in dazzling costumes—dressed as set off on a barge from Winchester House towards the palace. Behind their boat followed a number of other barges carrying musicians, their music delighting the onlookers. As the troop of players docked at Whitehall, they processed to the Banqueting House where His Majesty and the newly-wed royal couple awaited them. The nobles and ladies entered next. All took their seats. No doubt the customary silence and hushing of one another crept over the crowd as all in attendance gazed towards the stage. A special performance was about to begin. Two of the most celebrated writers of the age had written a masque which was about to be performed: *The Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn*, *of Gray's Inn and the Inner Temple* by Francis Beaumont.[1]



## *JOHN FLETCHER AND FRANCIS BEAUMONT*

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth century witnessed the high point of the English drama. At this period did one name, now familiar to people the world over, emerge into public consciousness: the name of William Shakespeare. Alongside our great English poet and playwright are a host of other names—Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Middleton, Robert Greene—to name but a few and, of course, Beaumont and Fletcher.

Although the masque which shall be discussed momentarily was written solely by Francis Beaumont, it is common to always speak and write of him alongside his partner John Fletcher. Though scarcely household names today, it would be difficult to overstate the fame of Beaumont and Fletcher in their own day. The poet John Dryden, in his *Essay of Dramatic* Poesy, observed that two of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays were staged for every one of Shakespeare's of Jonson's.[2] These two men, between them, had written over 52 plays. One of them, Fletcher, had twice collaborated with Shakespeare, on two plays: *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Henry VIII; or, All is True*.

Beaumont was born in Grace Dieu (now Thringstone) in Leicestershire in 1586. At the age of 10 he was enrolled as a 'gentleman commoner' at Broadgate Hall (now Pembroke College) at the University of Oxford where he would have received the standard classical education of the time with a view to practising law, which, by all accounts, he did not apply himself to fully, preferring writing to reading dusty old statutes. By 1607, his first play, written with his lifelong collaborator, co-habitant, and, indeed (so some say), lover,[3] John Fletcher, appeared on stage.[4] The high point of their career is marked in two plays which appeared close to each other: *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, based upon a story found in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and the Tragedy of *Bonduca*, Their partnership was a successful one and the pair of them together wrote, evinced by their contemporary fame and the quality of their output.

## *FORERUNNERS OF THE JACOBEAN MASQUE*

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[1] Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, 'The Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn, Gray's Inn and the Inner Temple', in *The Dramatic Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, ed. by George Colman, 3 vols (London: John Stockdale, 1811), III, pp. 369–74 (p. 370). All subsequent quotations to Beaumont and Fletcher's Masque are from this edition.

[2] M. C. Bradbrook, 'Introduction', in *Beaumont and Fletcher: Select Plays*, ed. by M. C. Bradbrook, 2nd edn (London: Dent, 1970), pp. v–x (p. v).

[3] See Rictor Norton, 'The Gay Guide to Westminster Abbey', https://rictornorton.co.uk/westmin.htm, accessed 22/12/2024

[4] Colman, *The Dramatic Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, I, p. 5.

Tudor and Jacobean England loved its masques. Described by one source as a combination of drama, opera, theatre, ballet, and ball, they were grand public spectacles which combined processions with short plays and dances were held in honour of a special event.[5] Importantly, they were events in which the nobility (and even royalty, on occasion) could participate.

I like to think of the masque as a kind of hangover, or adaptation, of the late medieval morality and mystery plays adapted for a more secular early modern age (some people, I'm aware, might disagree with that assessment). The mystery plays, which have a body of scholarship all to themselves, were indeed didactic but also served as entertainment at the royal court. In 1487, during the reign of Henry VII, for example, the King and his court at Winchester were entertained during their Sunday dinner, by the choirboys of Hyde Abbey and St. Swithin's Priory, with a representation of Christ's descent into Hell.[6]



The mysteries occurred not only at the royal court but also in the households of noblemen across the country. The Earl of Northumberland's *Household Book* (1512) reveals the performance of mystery plays during the twelve days of Christmas.[7] A poem inscribed beneath the frontispiece of William Hone's *Ancient Mysteries Described, especially the English Miracle Plays* (1823) gives an apt description of the religiously inspired entertainment enjoyed in the Middle Ages:

> When Friars, Monks, and Priests of former days
> Apocrypha and scripture turn'd to plays,
> The Festival of Fools and Asses kept,
> Obey'd boy bishops and to crosses crept,
> They made the mumming church the people's rod
> And held the grinning bauble for a God.

Just like their forerunners in the Middle Ages, masques were highly allegorical and generally represented some grand moral or long-wished for event which will culminate in general happiness and contentment.

The secularisation of morality plays began creep in around the time of the beginning of Henry VIII's reign, a reflection, no doubt, of an age which witnessed an increasing availability of classical texts and certainly, in England, a rejection of the Church of Rome. Such plays could still convey a moral, but the moral's did not have to be connected with the church, an attitude reflected in John Skelton's *Magnificence* (composed after 1515). Skelton's drama, which was never performed, sees a number of 'virtues' and 'vices'—including Felicity, Liberty, Measure on the one hand, and Folly, Adversity, Despair, and Redress on the other—each argue the brilliance of their own qualities before giving way to the brilliance of Magnificence who is the Prince of Virtues.[8]

The not-so-subtle allegory in Francis Beaumont's masque was the representation, with classical (not religious) figures, of the marriage of between an English princess and a German prince. Thus, the 'Devise or Argument' of the masque reads:

> JUPITER and JUNO, willing to do honour to the marriage of the two famous rivers, Thamesis and Rhine, employ their messengers severally, Mercury and Iris, for that purpose.

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[5] David M. Bergeron, 'Pageants, Masques, and History', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 41–56 (p. 41).
[6] Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry*, 3 vols (London: J. Dodsley, 1774–81), II, p. 206.
[7] William Hone, *Ancient Mysteries Described, especially the English miracle plays* (London: W. Hone, 1823), p. 215.
[8] John Skelton, 'Magnificence', in *The Complete Poems of John Skelton*, ed. by Philip Henderson, 3rd edn (London: J. M. Dent, 1959), p. 165.

It would have been clear to all who Thames and Rhine represent: It is the happy royal couple (A English princess represented by the Thames and a German prince represented by the Rhine) whose marriage is celebrated by the Greek and Roman deities. It is an event which the gods think everyone should know about, so they send forth the two messengers of the Gods, Mercury and Iris, to come and proclaim the happy event through the medium of the masque.



## *DEBTORS, CONTRIVERS, ARCHITECTS*

To produce the masque, several of the leading lights of the Jacobean cultural world came together to produce something marvellous. The title page of the quarto lists the piece as having been written by 'Francis Beamont [sic], Gent.' The nod to the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn in the title is owing to the fact that the man who commissioned it from Beaumont on the Inner Temple's behalf, was the essayist Sir Francis Bacon (listed by the Lord Chamberlain as the 'Chief Contriver' of the piece). Bacon was a member of Gray's Inn, while Fletcher had been enrolled briefly at Gray's Inn during his law days.[9]

Drama, however, is more than simply words. There are players, costumers, set designers, musicians, as well as a host of unnamed ushers and the like who all contribute to the making of an experience for the viewer. It was no different in the seventeenth century and the man who designed the set for the *Masque of the Inner Temple* was none other than Inigo Jones. Richly carved wooden arches, complete with Corinthian columns and statues of Greek and Roman goddesses in niches, and with the representation of a Romanesque dome at the top, often whitewashed, were a prominent feature of all masque sets.

Although no visual record survives of the arch constructed for The Masque of the Inner Temple, its appearance can be partially imagined through Inigo Jones's surviving designs for similar productions. His drawing for Oberon's Palace (see below), for instance, features Corinthian columns and a central dome that function much like a theatrical proscenium arch: they frame the spectacle, create a clear boundary between performers and audience, and conceal the less glamorous workings of the stagehands behind the barrier. The result is an illusion—what the audience sees is pure, unbroken spectacle.

## *THE MERGING OF THE CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL WORLDS*

Shakespeare had one foot in the medieval era and one in the modern era; his histories representing the English nation's past remain unparalleled. He also knew that the theatregoing public enjoyed tales drama set in what was then "modern" Italy (*Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*) as well Ancient Greece and Rome (*Timon of Athens*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Titus Andronicus*). With George Wilkins, Shakespeare produced the fine *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (performed in 1607) and the result of a collaboration with our John Fletcher the Bard produced *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (first performed between 1613 and 1614). Other masques besides that written by Beaumont, such as the similarly-titled *Inner Temple Masque* (performed 13 January 1614), by William Browne, featured Ulysses and Circe as its main characters.[10]

At the risk of sounding Whiggish, and for the purposes of brevity, classicism was especially popular because of the 'rediscovery' (by which we might say: increased accessibility due to printing) of Ancient Greek and Roman texts (though we note that Chaucer had founded much of his poetry upon episodes from ancient poetry, as he did in *Troilus and Criseyde* during the 1380s, which Shakespeare later adapted from Chaucer). Audiences wanted to see

[9] Philip Edwards, 'Introduction: The Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn by Francis Beaumont', in *A Book of Masques*, ed. by Gerald Eades Bentley, 3rd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 127–31 (p. 127).
[10] William Browne, 'The Inner Temple Masque', in Bentley, pp. 179–201.

classical history and mythology represented in the poetry they read and the plays that they watched, but oftentimes they also wanted a good dose of English influences inserted into those works. So Edmund Spenser could wax lyrical about Elizabeth I in the *Faerie Queene* (1590) while casually referencing Virgil. In Shakespeare and Wilkins's *Pericles*, the medieval English poet, John Gower—who was perceptive enough to predict the Peasants' Revolt of 1381[11]—delivers the prologue:



> To sing a song that old was sung
> From ashes ancient Gower is come,
> Assuming man's infirmities
> To glad your eyes and please your ears.[12]

Fletcher and Shakespeare were pleased to invoke the names of Geoffrey Chaucer and Robin Hood in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.[13] Beaumont and Fletcher were most definitely neoclassicists. We have already seen that figures no less great than Jupiter and Juno are invested in the success of the royal wedding as proclaimed in the masque. However, such august proceedings in the *Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn* would be interspersed with references to English folk traditions, much as Shakespeare and Fletcher invoked Robin Hood.

## *THE MASQUE AND THE ANTI-MASQUE*

But to understand how and why English folk traditions were incorporated into the masque, we need to understand the narrative and dramatic structure of the piece itself. *The Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn* was actually composed of several masques and anti-masques. During the masques, the most important part of the dramatic production, the main figures of the piece—Mercury and Iris—would speak their lines and drive the narrative of the short production forward. Then would come the anti-masque. This was the part of the production that was designed to dazzle people, consisting of new characters coming and performing a dance.

Mercury notes how the stone cupids upon the arch (people dressed as statues) begin to move in joyful celebration of the nuptials:

> Behold the statues which wise Vulcan plac'd
> Under the altar of Olympian Jove,
> And gave to them artificial life,
> Shall dance for joy of these great nuptials;
> See how they move, drawn by this heavenly joy,
> Like the wild trees which follow'd Orpheus' harp.

Then as part of the anti-masque, characters more familiar to the English countryside appear including a pedant, a May Lord and Lady, a Country Clown or Shepherd, a Chambermaid, a country wench, An [inn] Host and Hostess, and Servingman. There was a greater 'spirit of country jollity' around these figures and their dancing than appeared in the main masque. The May Lord and Lady, in particular, were familiar sights in village May Day festivals. Such festivals marked a symbolic period of renewal and coming of summer and were known for the dancing, led by a

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[11] John Gower, 'John Gower Foresees the Peasants' Revolt', in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. by R. B. Dobson (London: MacMillan, 1970), pp. 95-96.
[12] William Shakespeare and George Wilkins, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, ed. by Roger Warren (Oxford University Press, 2003), I.1, ll. 1–4.
[13] William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, ed. by Lois Potter, The Arden Shakespeare, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), l.15 and l.21.

May King and May Queen, and the election of a May Lord or, as Philip Stubbes described the May Lord in *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), a 'Lord of Misrule':

> First all the wildheads of the parish, conventing together, choose them a Grand-Captain (of all Mischief) whom they ennoble with the title of 'My Lord of Misrule', and him they crown with great solemnity, and adopt for their king […then they] march towards the churchyard, their pipers piping, their drummers thund'ring, their stumps dancing, their bells jingling.[14]



It was at such celebrations that the entirely fictional character, Maid Marian, first began to appear in the Robin Hood tradition, for a villager playing Robin Hood would often be elected as the May King and his queen would be someone playing the part of Marian.

In *The Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn*, we have lords and ladies, innkeepers and serving 'wenches' all gleefully participating. So don't let Stubbes's description fool you into thinking that May Day celebrations were something for rustic peasants—May Day celebrations were something enjoyed by all classes of people in the late medieval and early modern era. One person who thrice played Robin Hood at the May Day celebrations, in 1558, 1561, and 1562, was John Newcumb, a senior Warden. Even the young Henry VIII liked to dress up for May Day, which he did in 1515.[15] As we recall that all of these masques were highly symbolic, the inclusion of May Day revellers in the masque, dancing in celebration of the happy royal couple's big day, would have sent a clear message: the nation sends its best wishes. King James I loved this part of the masque so much that, once the May Day figures had finished their dancing and the anti-masque had come to a close, he immediately called for it to be played again.

As the anti-masquers had opened the figurative door to the medieval period with their Maying and dancing, so too the finale, or 'Main Masque', would see the medieval era spread its wings into this neoclassical world with the procession of the armour and mail-clad knights. The knights process to Jove's altar and receive a blessing from—again here, a curious mix of the classical and medieval—Roman priests dressed all in white, before leading their ladies into a dance. Then a final song begins: These medieval knights are called upon to inaugurate a new cycle of the Olympic Games in honour of the royal newlyweds:

> Ye should stay longer if we durst:
> Away! Alas that he should be the first
> Gave Time wild wings to fly away,
> Hath now no power to make him stay.
> But though these games must needs be play'd,
> I would this pair, then they are laid,
> And not a creature nigh them,
> Could catch his scythe, as he doth pass,
> And cut his wings, and break his glass,
> And keep him ever by them.

[14] Philip Stubbes, *Anantomie of Abuses* (1583) cited in David Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1981), p. 11.
[15] Wiles, *Early Plays of Robin Hood*, 14, 17.

The knights then put on their swords and belts and wait for the priests to deliver a final benediction to the royal pair:

> Peace and silence be the guide
> To the man, and to the bride!
> If there be a joy yet new
> In marriage, let it fall on you
> That all the world may wonder!



## *CONCLUSION*

Such a dazzling display! But what was the reaction of the king? Having demanded a second enactment of the anti-masque of the May Lord and May Queen, he then appeared to have lost interest: "The worst of all was that the King was so wearied and sleepie with sitting up almost two whole nights before, that he had no edge to yt."[16] Alas! The poor players were so distraught, and the king so mortified about his sleepiness, that all of the players were the next day invited to a special banquet at which the king, by way of apology, kissed each and every guest's hand. Any offence between the parties was quickly forgotten.

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[16] Edwards, p. 130.