



## Jonson, Ben: *The Irish Masque at Court*

(1613)

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Genre: Masque. Country: United Kingdom.

*The Irish Masque at Court* (1613) was staged in front of King James I and Queen Anne in the Great Hall of Whitehall Palace on 29 December 1613 and again on 3 January 1614. The performances were part of entertainments mounted to celebrate the wedding of the king's favorite, Robert Carr, to Frances Howard. The lack of any explicit references to the marriage in *The Irish Masque* suggests that Jonson may have written the piece before preparations for the wedding had started and intended it simply as part of the annual Christmas festivities at the court. It is, however, possible that he strategically avoided such references because of the scandal surrounding the union between Carr and Howard. Howard had just been through a notorious divorce and rumours about the couple's implication in a murder plot (of Thomas Overbury) were surfacing.

The masque was performed by young Scottish courtiers along with professional actors from the King's Men company. The courtiers played the Irish aristocrats, who appear in the main masque, while the professional actors played their lower-ranking Irish footmen, who perform the anti-masque. By contrast with Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* and *Masque of Queens*, no women appeared in *The Irish Masque*. Unlike some of Jonson's earlier and later masques, *The Irish Masque* did not feature any members of the royal family as Prince Henry had died in 1612 and Prince Charles was deemed too young to act. The Irish harpists kept by the royal couple at the time, Cormack McDermott and Daniel O'Cahill, likely supplied the harp music called for in the script. Although King James himself financed the performances, it was a time of relative austerity and the budget available to Jonson would have been smaller than those for many of his earlier and later masques. The architect Inigo Jones, Jonson's collaborator responsible for the visual side of the masques, was also away in Italy at the time. The financial constraints together with Jones's absence meant that *The Irish Masque* does not incorporate an elaborate scenic design and instead relies more heavily on the conventions of stage drama, including dialogues and physical acting.

*The Irish Masque* opens with an anti-masque, in which four Irish characters (Dennis, Donnell, Dermock, and Patrick) appear at the royal court and demand access to the king. They serve as footmen to a group of Anglo-Irish aristocrats, whose imminent arrival from Ireland they intend to announce to King James and his courtiers. The seemingly simple task poses multiple challenges to the Irish visitors. The footmen recount how they were initially barred from entering and even beaten with a stick wielded by the Lord Chamberlain. "Ish it te fashion to beat te imbashators here, ant knock 'em o' te heads phit te phoit stick?" (206) wonders Donnell. Once in the monarch's presence, they repeatedly quarrel among themselves as they try to negotiate how best to approach and address the king. The entry of the footmen's masters, the Anglo-Irish aristocrats, is delayed because they have lost their festive apparel in a sea-storm. Dennis explains that "te villainous vild Irish sheas

have casht away all ter [i.e. the masters'] fine cloysh” (208). The footmen are however eventually ordered away from the Hall and an Irish Gentleman ushers in a bard and harpists. These musicians provide the music for the dance of the Anglo-Irish aristocrats, which constitutes the masque proper. The aristocrats start out the dance dressed in rustic Irish mantles. The lyrics of the bard’s song then reveal that King James’s court had somehow miraculously recovered or recreated the lost masquing apparel as they invite the dancers to cast off their mantles and uncover the rich garments beneath: “your slough let fall,/ And come forth newborn creatures all” (212). The masque concludes without the customary “revels” (the final dance in which the courtiers watching the performance could normally join). This was probably because none of the actors appearing in the masque were high-ranking enough to invite some of the high profile women present in the audience to dance without breaking the decorum of the court.

The plot of the anti-masque provides the crude irreverent humour and anti-heroic characters common to the form as developed by Jonson. At the same time, the threats of social disorder and violence implied in the anti-masque likely reflect the anxieties surrounding the English and Scottish colonization of Ireland, which the Jacobean government was intensifying at the time. The masque itself, with the banishment of the coarse-mannered, quarrelsome Irish characters and the enactment of the restorative power of King James’s court, creates a vision of a harmonious union between England, Ireland, and Scotland. It is interesting to note that both groups of Irish characters from *The Irish Masque* represent English settlers: the footmen the so-called “Old English”, who had arrived in Ireland after the Norman Conquest and remained Catholic; their Anglo-Irish masters the more recently arrived Protestant settlers. The Irish language (Gaelic) appears in the Irish Masque only in the form of a few loan words domesticated in the Anglo-Irish dialect of English: “garrans”(horses), “bonny-clabber” (clotted milk), and “usquebagh” (whiskey) (208-9).

Neither illustrations nor written accounts of the performances survive. *The Irish Masque* was first published in the folio *Works of Benjamin Jonson* in 1616. It was reprinted in the same format in the second folio of 1640/41.

#### **Works Cited:**

Orgel, Stephen, ed. *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975.

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First published 12 March 2013

**Citation:** Vyroubalova, Ema. "The Irish Masque at Court". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 12 March 2013. [http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=34914, accessed 14 March 2013.]

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ISSN 1747-678X