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***To entertain, instruct  
and celebrate***  
*Studies in early modern theatre and  
theatricality in memory of André  
Lascombes*

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# Exotic Visitors

## Exotic Visitors in Courtly Entertainment 1350-1600

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This paper explores a theatrical trope that flourished in Europe from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Its focus is the performance entertainments at the courts of England and Scotland which, as elsewhere in Europe, were often imagined and enacted as the arrival of unknown visitors journeying from distant, exotic or marvellous lands and making a spectacular entry to court festivities. Surveying the history and the different manifestations of this motif may help to probe the purposes, semantics and implications of the trope: what made it such an enduring feature of courtly entertainment, and what kinds of meanings was it used to convey? The topic was prompted by one of André Lascombes' late journal articles, "La lente arrivée du Maure ou du Turc dans le théâtre anglais c. 1450-1600".<sup>1</sup> As his title suggests, he explores, with his characteristic acumen and far-reaching knowledge, the particular figures of Moors and Turks, drawing on a wide range of fully dramatic texts. He acknowledges the court shows in passing, and my development of this one small strand of his survey owes much to his intellectual and personal insights, research and example over many years.

### **"My devise was to cum oute of the mone"**

Ahead of the Christmas festivities for the young King Edward VI in 1552/3, George Ferrers, an established courtier and member of the royal household, was appointed as Lord of Misrule to design, oversee and perform in the celebrations.<sup>2</sup> He wrote to Thomas Cawarden, the Master

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<sup>1</sup> LASCOMBES, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> For Ferrers and his management of these revels, see STREITBERGER, 2012: 192-202.

of the Revels, to arrange for the necessary props, costumes and supplies, explaining the central motif he had chosen for his own role in the programme of entertainment:

Where the last yeare my devise was to cum oute of the mone / this yeare I Imagin to cum oute of a place caulled *vastum vacuum* .I. the great waste / asmoche to saie as a place voyde or emptie withoute the worlde where is neither fier ayre water nor earth.<sup>3</sup>

Both last year and this, it seems, Ferrers had conceived of the celebrations as centring on the spectacular arrival at court of a visitor from a marvellous land.

Further details in his letter show just how magnificent this entry is to be, and how significant it is as the framing device of the festivities. His costume is to be adapted to the strange place from which he comes: “because of Certaine devisis whiche I haue towching this matter / I wolde yf it were possible haue all myne apparel blewe”. He goes into more practical detail: “Towchyng my suet of blew I haue sent you a pece of velvet which hath a kind of powdred ermaines in it vearie fytt for my wering yf you so thinke good”. He proposes a stately entry for himself: “how I shall cum into the courte whether vnder a Canepie as the last yeare, or in a chare trivmphall, or vppon some straunge beast that I reserve to you”. Significantly, the arrival will be framed as a formal diplomatic visitation, heralded by an official embassy:

Vppon Christmas daie I send a solempe ambassade to the kings Maiestie by an herald trumpet an orator speaking in a straunge language an // Interpreter or a truchman with him.

The herald will be accompanied with a drum and fife, whose players must be “apparelled like turkes garments according to the patornes I send you herwith”.

Ferrers’ own entry is to be staged as the culmination of a long journey. He will arrive by boat up the river; when he lands at Greenwich he will be met by a horse, and four pages, “one careing my hedpece, a nother my Shelde / the third my sword and the fourth my axe”. The Lord of Misrule with his train is to be a glorious visitor from a fantastic unknown land who has come on a journey from afar to honour the King’s court, by his presence and the shows he will put on.

Ferrers’ conception of the Christmas entertainment as an exotic visitation was clearly spectacular and his performances were apparently well-received. According to

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3 FEUILLERAT, 1914: 89. For the concept of “the great waste”, see GRANT, 1994: Chapter 9, “Extracosmic void space”, 169-185.

*Grafton's Chronicle*, in the previous year when he had arrived from the moon he “so well supplied his office, both in shew of sundry sightes and deuises of rare inuention” that he pleased everyone, his shows being admired “best of al by the yong king himselfe”.<sup>4</sup> But while Ferrers’ programme was exceptionally lavish, his central device was by no means original. He was in fact drawing on a trope of courtly performance which already had an established history of some 200 years, and would continue at least until the end of the sixteenth century. Theatrical and paradramatic entertainment at court was very often imagined and performed as the arrival of a high-status visitor journeying from a distant and marvellous land, making a spectacular entry to the court hosting the festivities.

Late medieval and sixteenth-century courts constituted a particular environment for performance. The court offers a select, relatively closed, and largely elite audience; significant wealth and resources; a consciousness of its own importance as a centre of power and culture; and a taste for performing its own magnificence, both to itself and to important and international visitors. Although courts at times were important locations for scripted drama, they also offered a theatrical environment in which non-verbal performance flourished, where distinctions between performers and spectators tended to be fluid, and in which theatrical or quasi-theatrical performance was often an extension of courtly life itself, which was always lived largely in public, under observation. All of these features may contribute to the popularity of the motif of exotic visitation. They may also suggest some of the reasons—practical, ideological, imaginative, or functional—which may have led to the motif, and which sustained it through such a long period of time.

One practical reason for court performance to be shaped in this way is because, at the court, entertainment comes to the audience and the audience’s space, rather than the audience going to the place of performance. There are certainly records of halls, banqueting houses and dancing chambers built specifically for shows and revels—such as the “long hovs” that Henry VIII had built in 1527, which was “ordayned and maad for pastyme and to do solas to strangers [...] fvrynshed of werke of plessyer for reuells of dysguysyng and meskelyng”.<sup>5</sup> But at least as often, entertainments made an entry into the court’s living space—the great hall, or other chambers where the court was gathering, eating or conducting its business. The entry of the performers is then itself made into a part of the performance. The visit must be spectacular, as the wealth and dignity of the court require; and the characterisation and supposed status of the visitors serve to both reflect and honour the status of the court itself. This lends itself to the notion of an envoy or ambassador of a foreign potentate. The honour to the host court is further increased

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4 GRAFTON, 1809: vol. 2, 527.

5 STREITBERGER, 2012: 125.

by the distance and otherness of the land from which the visitors have travelled. The far-flung world is fictively brought into the home court.

Another factor in the framing of court entertainment in this way may arise from the fluid relationship between performing and spectating in court festivity. Professional performers were clearly active in court shows—musicians and chapel choristers, interlude-players and acrobats, all played for the court. But a good deal of such entertainment was performed by the members of the court for themselves and their international visitors: dance, disguising and masking, jousting and other battle games, and various kinds of spectacle all involved courtly performers, with the identity of those courtly performers sometimes itself a key aspect of the performance.<sup>6</sup> The concealment, or pretended concealment, of their identities in physical disguises and adopted personae was often a part of the pleasure of the performance. In such cases, adopting a persona as mysteriously foreign, and implying a long and arduous journey to reach the court, is a playful way of making strange the familiar and recognisable – of suspending, or pretending to suspend, known court identities for a festive period of release.

The fiction of the exotic visitation therefore plays in tension with the identity of the court. On the one hand, the motif dramatises and celebrates the global reach of the court, its openness to distant powers and cultures, and its magnetic attractiveness as a centre to which those distant powers are drawn. Yet conversely it may be seen as reinforcing the elite and inward-turned nature of the court: exotic cultures simply provide fantasy disguises whereby the court can play out its own games of identity and self-enhancement. The performance of the exotic visitation allows the court to open itself to the marvels of a distant world; but it is a very safely imagined, spectacularised and appropriated version of that world.

These are factors that apply across the courts of Europe right through the later middle ages and sixteenth centuries. Courtly entertainment culture itself was broadly shared across the continent, and courts frequently entertained international noble visitors, as well as diplomats and ambassadors from other courts. The popular motif was therefore in some senses dramatising an established international function. But it could also be used in interesting variations to address particular preoccupations of court culture or to comment on or even intervene in particular political moments. To explore its possibilities, this essay will first consider the trope through examples of performances where the court appears primarily to be addressing itself, making play with its own elite identity, and enhancing its own magnificence. This will provide a foundation for the discussion of

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6 See CARPENTER, 1997.

some of the more particular political implications of performances which were also used to address the court's relationship with the world beyond its own community.

### Exotic visitors and the court

Evidence of exotic visitation shaping entertainment at the English court survives from at least the mid-fourteenth century. One vivid witness is found in some recently discovered copies of letters from the court of Edward III, probably originally dating from around the late 1350s. These take the form of jousting challenges, written as if from imaginary queens from far-flung lands, each one recommending a worthy combatant to the lady presiding over a joust at the English court.<sup>7</sup> Composed in the court language of Anglo-Norman or Insular French, they create a fictional framework for the proposed jousts, contributing to the deliberate theatricalisation of battle games that was already much in vogue.<sup>8</sup> One letter, for example, is written as from “Pantesilia, puissante Roigne de Perse, de Femenye et de Frisce, Dame de Damaske et d’Aufrike la grand” (Pantesilia, powerful Queen of Persia, of Femenye and Frisce, Lady of Damascus and of Africa the Great);<sup>9</sup> another from “Niolas, noble Roigne de Nuby, des Philistiens et de les gentz Pharao, Dame d’ambes les mieres d’Araby et de Surry” (Niolas, noble Queen of Nubia, of the Philistines and of the people of Pharaoh, Lady of both the seas of Arabia and Syria).<sup>10</sup> These imaginary potentates are writing formal diplomatic letters to their counterparts at the English court—most often to Queen Philippa. They ask favour for the young challengers they are supposedly sending from their distant lands, and seek to arrange jousts for them with members of Edward's court. Thus, from Niolas:

nous vient tresgraunde joie et plesaunce d’envoier devers vostre tresfamous court un nostre chier et bien amé escuier, neez et norriz en nostre lige terre du South, nomez Segramour [...] em priaunt de trestout nostre cuer que please a vostre noble noblay d’assigner un de voz meillours, jolifs joustours [...] pur lui enseigner coment les chivalerouses chivalers de vostre court soloient enseigner lour filz et enfauntz de lour assaier as selles tenir.<sup>11</sup>

(we have enormous joy and pleasure in sending to your most famous court a dear and well-loved squire of ours, born and brought up in our liege land of the South, called

7 For an edition and discussion of the letters, see BENNETT *et al.*, 2018. All quotations from the letters are referenced to this edition.

8 See VALE, 1982: 57-75; BENNETT *et al.*, 2018: 308-309.

9 *Ibid.*: 317.

10 *Ibid.*: 325.

11 *Ibid.*: 325.

Segramour [...] begging with our whole heart, that it may please your noble nobility to assign one of your best, jolly jousters [...] to teach him how the chivalrous knights of your court used to teach their sons and children to test themselves in staying firm in the saddle.)

The letters create a theatrical frame around the jousting games set up for the entertainment of the court, apparently at “vostre festivale feste de Noël” (your festive feast of Christmas) when hastiludes like this would be a normal part of the celebrations. With the challengers supposedly sent from marvellous or imagined lands, the sporting encounter has been playfully set within a fiction of chivalric romance, with the arrival of the joustier cast as an exotic visitation.<sup>12</sup> We do not know exactly how this fiction might have contributed to the staging of the jousts: while the letters themselves seem evidently designed for public delivery and reading, it is not clear whether the entry of the challengers or the combat itself involved further layers of performance. However, by setting up this fictional context around the challenger, the imagined eastern queens draw the court, the joust and its lady, into a quasi-performed fiction of romance splendour.

The performing joustiers were known and recognised members of court, rather than genuine strangers. Some are identified in the letters, though at times by allusions not decipherable today, or even by jests, with one letter seeming to elaborate a risqué joke against the king himself.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that in spite of their imaginative magnificence the letters are designed for relatively informal occasions. The flamboyantly imagined queens offer extravagant compliments from afar that allow the English court to playfully enact itself as “la lune lusaunte et graunde” (the great and shining moon) in comparison to “les esteilles petites et meins” (the small and lesser stars) of other courts, or as “la source et fontaine d’amour et d’armes” (the source and fountain of love and arms).<sup>14</sup> Edward’s court appears to be light-heartedly playing out to itself a vision of its own magnificence.

These jousting letters offer an early instance of the exotic visitor as a motif for entertainments which playfully celebrate courtly identity. This remains an important role for the trope throughout its history. Some 150 years later, we find apparently very similar impulses animating a different kind of entertainment at the court of Henry VIII. By this time fuller accounts of what occurred survive, allowing us to probe further into the detail of the performances and the meanings they appeared to have carried. Henry had a personal enthusiasm for performing, especially in his youth, and his court was renowned

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12 For an even more theatrically fictionalised romance version of the trope, compare *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with the dramatic entrance of an exotic stranger to Christmas games (see TWYXCROSS and CARPENTER, 2002: 154-155).

13 BENNETT *et al.*, 2018: 324.

14 *Ibid.*: 325, 321-322.



for its enjoyment of lavish disguising and masking entertainments. One common pattern was for a troop of masked dancers, dressed in spectacular costumes often drawn from exotic lands, to make a “sodayn”, supposedly unexpected, entrance into the festive court.<sup>15</sup> Dancers might be dressed “lyke to the Egypcians”, “after y<sup>e</sup> fassion of Inde”, or “appareled after Turkey fasshion”.<sup>16</sup> After performing their dances, the maskers would often take partners from among the audience for further dancing, while a common conclusion to the entertainment involved the removal of the masks to reveal that the exotic strangers were none other than members of the court.<sup>17</sup> Such disguisings thus open with a magnificent arrival of strangers supposedly from a distant land; the entertainment that follows gradually draws the rest of the court into the performance, dissolving the separation between the magnificent Other and the court itself, until the Other is finally “revealed” as the known and familiar.

One well-known and particularly full account of such an entertainment is provided by George Cavendish, gentleman-usher to Thomas Wolsey, in his *Lyffe and Deathe* of the Cardinal.<sup>18</sup> On this occasion it was the king who acted as the exotic visitor. He headed a party of maskers dressed in crimson satin and cloth of gold, travelling by boat along the river Thames to York House, where Cardinal Wolsey was holding a banquet. The Cardinal clearly knew of the plan, but supported the fiction of an unexpected visitation. The Lord Chamberlain, asked to look out of the window, reported that “it Semed to them that there shold be some noble men & strayngers arrived at his brygge As Ambassitors frome some forrayne prynce”.<sup>19</sup> The distance of the journey, and the strangeness of the visitors, is then elaborated, as the Lord Chamberlain escorted the party into the banquet and explained to the Cardinal: “Syr for as myche as they be strayngers And can speke no Englysshe thay haue desired me to declare vnto yo<sup>r</sup> grace thus”—explaining that, having heard of the magnificent assembly, they have come to dice and dance with the guests. Like George Ferrers, who sent his herald orator with an “Interpreter or a truchman”, these visitors are characterised as not only from distant lands, but as “speaking in a straunge language”.

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15 See TWYXCROSS and CARPENTER, 2002: 128-150. Throughout this paper, entertainments following this pattern are referred to as *masks*, following original spelling practice and to avoid confusion with the seventeenth-century form now known as *masques*.

16 HALL, 1809: 597, 595, 513.

17 TWYXCROSS and CARPENTER, 2002: 148-150.

18 CAVENDISH, 1959: 25-28. The description of this entertainment was well known in its own day, with Cavendish's account appearing in brief form in Holinshed's *Chronicles of England* (1587) and John Stow's *Annals* (1592) before being adopted by Shakespeare and Fletcher in *Henry VIII* as a frame for Henry's first meeting with Anne Boleyn.

19 CAVENDISH, 1959: 26.

The motif of the “strange language” seems to have been adopted by the court into the exotic visitation from the practices of mumming—a partly analogous popular custom also based on the unexpected visit of strangers.<sup>20</sup> The mumming tradition involved a house visit by heavily disguised young men who challenged householders to a game of chance, in the hope of winning money or hospitality. To maintain anonymity, mummers customarily remained silent, or said no more than “mum”. Courtly visitations, with their performers disguised as exotic foreigners concerned to maintain their assumed identity, would often elaborate this into a fiction involving the need for an interpreter to introduce noble visitors who had no knowledge of the host’s language. Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost* draws on his audience’s familiarity with this trope when Berowne and the young lords make a similar visit to the ladies of France extravagantly disguised as “Muscovites”, who have travelled “many weary miles”, and are dependent on their young page and Boyet to interpret their strange tongue.<sup>21</sup>

In Henry VIII’s mask, a great deal of the pleasure enjoyed by both audience and performers seems to have been in playing along with the notion of a foreign embassy which all parties know to be an extravagant fiction. Yet there was also delight in choosing the moment to break down the separation between that performed fiction of strangeness and the court itself. The maskers, as was common in such mumming-based performances, challenged the company to a game of dice, in this case apparently weighted to favour the host. The Cardinal then suggested that there must be some particularly honourable man among the visitors, to whom he would gladly yield his place. The message comes back through the interpreter that there is indeed such a person, and the Cardinal is invited to guess which he is. Wolsey, perhaps deliberately (although masking costume was a highly effective disguise), offered his chair to the wrong man—Sir Edward Neveyll, who apparently “resembled the kynges person”. Then:

The kyng heryng & perceyvyng the Cardynall so disseyved in his estymacion and choys  
 cowld not forbear lawing / but plucked down his visare & mr Neveylles & dasht owt  
 w<sup>t</sup> suche a pleasaunt Countenaunce & cheare / that all noble estates there assembled  
 seyng the kyng to be there among them reioysed.<sup>22</sup>

The magnificent visitor is not an exotic stranger at all, but their own monarch. Through this entertainment, the audience and performers are playing teasingly, knowingly, along

20 For mumming, the overlap between elite and popular practice, and a fuller discussion of this episode, see TWYXCROSS and CARPENTER, 2002: 151-168.

21 SHAKESPEARE, ed. David, 1968: Act III, Scene ii.

22 CAVENDISH, 1959: 27-28.

the boundary between fact and fiction. The king's identity is known, but not known; the astonishing ambassador of a distant power who honours the Cardinal's party by his presence turns out to be the even more truly astonishing and magnificent king, who generously shares his presence with the banqueters. The exotic visitation is in a sense turned inside-out and incorporated back into the court: it has pretended to make itself strange by displacing itself into a marvellous fiction, but in doing so it really enacts its own magnificence and celebrates elite comradeship.

The two entertainments considered so far are not of a kind unique to England but share in wider European courtly practice. A magnificently illustrated example, which throws vivid light on the form, while also linking jousting and masking performances, is found in the lavish illustrations prepared for the *Freydal*, a semi-fictional record of the tournaments and associated festivities of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I before his marriage to Mary of Burgundy in 1477.<sup>23</sup> Between 1511 and 1515 he commissioned 256 images of a series of jousts followed by evening performances, apparently based on "all those costumes as yet seen in mummeries organised by his majesty".<sup>24</sup> The jousters, though elaborately and splendidly armed, are not given fictional personae, but the "mummeries" frequently appear to follow almost exactly the form of Henry VIII's masking visit. One image, for example, presents a group extravagantly costumed and masked (probably as Muscovites), who approach the hall, led by torchbearers and a noble individual who appears to be a presenter, while ladies wait inside to receive the exotic visitors.<sup>25</sup> Henry was a known admirer of Maximilian, and it is not surprising that their courts shared motifs of a chivalric style that was influential across Europe.

### Political uses

Although separated by some 150 years, the jousting and masking entertainments under Edward III and Henry VIII both exemplify how the trope of the exotic visitation reinforced, through pleasurable playfulness, the splendid self-image of the court. But the motif was not always designed solely for such inward-facing effect. Sometimes, the arrivals of exotic visitors reference, and even intervene in, political events beyond the elite ambience of courtly leisure. Even George Ferrers' journey from the moon to the court of Edward VI appears to have been understood as having some such purpose. Of all the exotic visitations, his might seem the most fanciful, the least likely to have any purchase

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23 TERJANIEN, 2019: 120-126.

24 Cited from the *Erstes Gedenkbuch Kaiser Maximilians I*, 1502, by TERJANIEN, 2019: 123.

25 *Freydal*. see image at: <<http://www.wienerkongress1515.at/en/lightboxes/image/?type=image&uid=55397&idx=0&cHash=9187ba34e8bf10fed65552b849c5f47a>>.

on social reality. However, some contemporary commentators viewed it as having a topical political motivation. Richard Grafton, who was King's printer to Edward VI, commented in his *Chronicle* on the context of Ferrers' entertainment. It had been arranged very much at the last minute, for the Christmas season of 1551/52. Early in December 1551 the Lord Protector, the Duke of Somerset, uncle of the young king, had been condemned to death for treason. Grafton records that:

the people spake diuersly and murmured against [...] the Lordes for the condempnation of the sayd Duke, and also as the common fame went, the kings maiestie tooke it not in good part: wherfore aswell to remooue fond talke out of mennes mouthes, as also to recreate and refreshe the troubled spirites of the yong king, it was deuised that [...] Christmas [...] should be solely kepte at Greenewiche<sup>26</sup>

and a Lord of Misrule was appointed, "to make sporte in the Courte". Ferrers was given a huge budget of £500 to organise the spectacular shows to a very demanding timetable, with surviving documents from the Revels Office showing just how rushed preparations were.<sup>27</sup> According to Grafton, Christmas was "thus passed and spent with much mirth and pastime, wherewith the minds and eares of murmurers were meetely well appeased",<sup>28</sup> while the Duke of Somerset was executed in January. The extreme fantasy of George Ferrers' journey from the moon may therefore have been itself part of a deliberate governmental ploy, designed to distract king, court and Londoners from a tense political situation. The apparently frivolous magnificence of the visitation and its associated city-wide entertainments was understood, at least by some observers, as a serious means of managing political events.

Long before this, however, the trope of exotic visitation had carried political or topical dimensions. One of the fullest early accounts of a striking exotic visitation records an elaborate masked visit to the young Prince of Wales, soon to be crowned Richard II, which was arranged by the City of London in January 1377. The *Anonimalle Chronicle* describes a grand torchlit procession through London to Kennington, including dozens of masked knights and squires, with "une excellentment arraye et bien mounte come empereur ust este" (one person, excellently costumed and well mounted as if he had been an Emperor), and another "noblement arraie come une pape" (splendidly costumed as a Pope), with a train of Cardinals and black-masked followers.<sup>29</sup> The spectacular visitors

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26 GRAFTON, 1809: 526.

27 STREITBERGER, 2012: 195-196.

28 GRAFTON, 1809: 527.

29 *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 1970: 102-103.

entered the hall where the prince was dining with his mother, his uncle John of Gaunt and other nobles, and challenged him to a game of dice, weighted in the prince's favour so that he received three gifts of gold.

Stow's sixteenth-century translation of the *Anonimale Chronicle* talks of this event as "made by the Citizens for disport of the yong prince".<sup>30</sup> He reads it through the perspective of later entertainments, like Henry VIII's mask for Wolsey, even adding the assertion, unmentioned in the original account, that the members of the procession appeared "as if they had beene Legates from some forrain Princes". Clearly, "disport" was an important part of its function; but Meg Twycross has investigated how this exotic visitation appears to be conveying more serious political messages.<sup>31</sup> It was performed at a time of considerable tension for the City of London, both internally and between it and the government. Edward III was sick, nearing the end of his long reign, and there was anxiety over the accession of the ten-year-old Richard as king, while John of Gaunt, effectively the leader of government, was in serious conflict with the City over its ancient liberties and rights. The so-called "Bad Parliament" of 1377, which opened only a few days before the Kennington visitation, was presided over for the first time by Prince Richard. The parliament's opening speech framed the young prince in terms alluding to the Epiphany and the visit of the Magi, an image picked up by the gift-giving procession of the Londoners. It seems likely that their entertainment was not just designed to offer the prince pleasurable entertainment. Twycross points out how, by choosing this moment to cast themselves as imperial diplomatic visitors, the City symbolically, festively, asserted its independence: its members' right to engage directly with their young future monarch, and to offer him gifts and loyalty on their own terms. By doing this they might aim to establish positive relationships with the Crown, while protecting their own status and bypassing their tense relations with John of Gaunt and the parliament.

Jousting fantasies like those seen in the tournament letters at Edward III's court could also at times carry a political dimension. New Year's Day 1401 was celebrated with a tournament spectacle at the court of Henry IV for which a very similar set of letters survive.<sup>32</sup> Like those in the earlier collection, though somewhat more elaborate, they are sent from imaginary figures such as "Phebus la principall planet du ffirmament" (Phoebus, the principal planet of the firmament) and "Cleopatra [...] Roigne de Mesolopolitanie & de Gobosse / Ainsne fille de treshault Empereur Dynde la maieur appelle prester Johane"

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30 STOW, 1908: vol. 1, 97.

31 For a full analysis of the political implications of this event, see TWYXCROSS, 2021.

32 For discussion, and a transcription/translation of one MS copy, see CARPENTER *et al.*, 2021. Quotations from the letters are referenced to this publication.

(Cleopatra [...] Queen of Mesopotamia and of Gobosse, eldest daughter of the exalted Emperor of Greater India who is called Prester John).<sup>33</sup> They recommend to Henry's young daughter Blanche, presiding over the tournament, young challengers who travel from their distant lands, sometimes defining their quests in a fictional allegorical or romance frame.

Over the Christmas festivities of 1400/01, Henry IV was entertaining Manuel II Paleologus, Emperor of Constantinople, who was visiting the rulers of Europe seeking military and financial support from them against the Ottoman Turks who were besieging his city.<sup>34</sup> In the light of the Byzantine Emperor's presence, the most interesting of the letters is that sent from "Dalida, par la grace de Mahomet dieu de tous vrayz Infidelz & Sarrazins Soudan de Babilon & Roy Dalexandrie" (Dalida, by the grace of Mahomet God of all true infidels and Saracens, Sultan of Babylon and King of Alexandria).<sup>35</sup> The letter acknowledges the presence of the imperial visitor, recognising that the king, "a cest feste de Noell tient moult solennell & loable Court & tant solennell quil a en sa Court vne Emperour" (at this feast of Christmas is holding a most magnificent and praiseworthy Court, so magnificent that there is in his court an Emperor).<sup>36</sup> The writer describes a wonderful spectacle that will be presented to honour Manuel, of knights riding dragons with fire jetting from their helmets and shields. The journeying of the young jousting knight who is sent by Dalida is emphasised: "Il lui semble quil lui conuendroit cheminer & errer maintes contrees chasteaulx villez & Citees montaignes valees bois & Riuiers auant quil peust trouuer vne tiel quil demaund" (It seems to him that he needs to travel and wander through many countries, castles, towns and cities, mountains, valleys, woods, and rivers, before he will be able to find a suitable person to challenge).

This letter, from another Eastern potentate, may have gestured at the distant origin of the Emperor of Constantinople. Avoiding any direct reference to Manuel's homeland or military situation, the Sultan's fictional Saracen affiliations are not themselves politicised, but are recognisable from romance and balanced by an acknowledgement of the Christian model of exotic visitation, the journey of the Magi.<sup>37</sup> Dalida presents himself as ruler by the grace of Mohammed, while courteously acknowledging Blanche as princess "par la grace de celluy a qui lez troys Roys offrissent ore ensence & mirre" (by the grace of Him to whom the Three [Eastern] Kings offered gold, frankincense, and myrrh).<sup>38</sup>

33 CARPENTER *et al.*, 2021: 82-83, 100-101.

34 For this visit and its background see NICOL, 1970.

35 CARPENTER *et al.*, 2021: 88-89.

36 *Ibid.*: 88-89.

37 For romance treatment of Muslim figures, see, e.g., CALKIN, 2012.

38 CARPENTER *et al.*, 2021: 88-89.

The trope of exotic visitation offers a fictional channel to welcome and celebrate the Emperor's presence.

The conclusion of the letter brings us closer to the political purpose of Manuel's visit. It requests that the young jousting opponent at Henry's court should be "le Chiualer de vostre Court qui plus grande desir a de fair le Conquest du Royaume de Jerusalem soit Roy Prince Duc ou Conte Chiualer ou Escuier" (the knight of your court who has the greatest desire to accomplish the conquest of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, whether he be King, Prince, Duke or Count, knight or squire).<sup>39</sup> This seems to include a significant allusion to Henry himself as a possible chivalric champion: a renowned jousting knight, he had travelled to Jerusalem in 1392 and was associated with a lasting desire to join a crusade to free the city. However, while publicising his readiness to engage against the enemies of Christendom, the letter avoids any commitment to Manuel's prime objective, aid towards the relief of Constantinople from the Turks. Henry IV was in a difficult domestic situation, barely a year after usurping the throne from his cousin Richard II, and was in no position to give military support. The 1401 performance drew on the trope of the exotic visitation to offer a spectacular show of generous hospitality, shared chivalric values and military splendour; but though no doubt diplomatically significant, this was not to be matched by practical help.

### Speech texts

Very few texts survive of spoken elements of these visitation performances: speech, when it played any part at all, was a minor element of this kind of spectacular event. Theatrically, the trope is based on action and spectacle rather than words: magnificent strangers arrive from a distant land to bring in an entertainment, commonly involving activities such as games of challenge, dancing and gift-giving. The faces of the visitors are often hidden, and they generally speak not at all, or else in a supposedly foreign tongue. This structure may explain why the few British examples of spoken texts for these entertainments that survive from the mid-fifteenth century onwards tend to be delivered by presenters and focus heavily on the journey that precedes the performers' arrival. These introductions stand slightly outside the performance itself, enhancing the glamorous otherness of the visitors and providing the context, rather than the substance, of the performance to follow.

The earliest known spoken performance text that can be linked to the trope appears to date from 1430. The 1377 mumming visit to Prince Richard shows that the City, as well as the court, was ready to draw on the exotic visitor motif to celebrate and express its status and concerns, and our first surviving speech is part of such a City entertain-

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39 *Ibid.*, 2021: 90-91.

ment. The show was “brought by a poursuyvaunt [messenger] in wyse of [in the style of] mommers desguysed to fore the Mayre of London, Eestfeld, upon the twelfethe night of Cristmasse, ordeyned ryallych by the worthy merciers, citeseyns of London”.<sup>40</sup> This occasion has been identified as 6 January 1430, and a manuscript copy survives of an elaborate speech written for the pursuivant, who acted as the presenter to introduce the visitors. It was composed by the poet John Lydgate, which may well account for its preservation in a collection of his similarly theatrical texts.<sup>41</sup> Although the performance is referred to as a mumming, and consequently probably involved the traditional entrance of flamboyantly costumed and masked visitors to engage silently with the audience, the speech gives no account of the entertainment itself.<sup>42</sup> The pursuivant instead offers a detailed account of his own adventurous journey to London, carrying letters of introduction from Jupiter. He explains:

Oute of Surrye, by many straunge stronde,  
This Jubiter hathe his lettres sent,  
Thoroughe oute Europe...<sup>43</sup>

This account of the delivery of letters from an imagined distant potentate seems to link the mumming to the letters of challenge for the jousting entertainments at the courts of Edward III and Henry IV, and the pursuivant similarly concludes by introducing strangers arriving from far countries. First, though, he elaborates vividly the journey he has himself undertaken from distant Syria. After some mythological reflections on the geography of the Middle East, he describes passing Egypt and the Red Sea, taking ship from Jaffa, passing by the Gulf of Venice to the Straits of Gibraltar, rounding Spain and passing along the English Channel and up the river Thames. There he encounters several newly-landed though unidentified ships, and arrives at Mayor Eastfield’s hall to introduce their occupants as “Certein estates, wheche purveye and provyde”, who have come

For to vysyte and seen the noble Mayr  
Of this cytee and maken theyre repayr  
To his presence, or that they firther flitte.<sup>44</sup>

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40 LYDGATE, 2010: Headnote. For a full diplomatic edition and discussion see TWYLCROSS and DUTTON, 2014.

41 See SPONSLER, 2010: Introduction.

42 For discussion of the relationship of the speech to the performance, see TWYLCROSS and DUTTON, 2014: 322-327.

43 LYDGATE, 2010: l. 36-38.

44 *Ibid.*: l. 101-104.



The pursuivant concludes by begging the mayor to admit the unknown visitors to his hall.

The nature and subject of the entertainment itself remain puzzling. The Mercers appear to have commissioned Lydgate to write an introductory presenter's speech and, either under instruction or by his own invention, he has couched that speech as a detailed account of the journey that has led to the place of performance. The speech offers an extended and richly allusive account of an adventurous voyage along the cargo routes of the Mediterranean. In this sense, the journey, although spectacularly presented, is much more firmly rooted in real travel and its purposes than the romance fictions of other examples of the trope. Whatever its connection to the disguising that follows, it certainly honours, both thematically and practically, the travel and trade of the wealthy mercers. The merchants are not simply enacting a splendid fantasy, but claiming for themselves the glamour of distant lands which underlay their occupation and wealth. The journey of visitors from the East, again performed on the Feast of Epiphany, offers to the City, as to the court, a spectacular imaginative endorsement of its own status.

This kind of textual framing of the silent performances seems to have established itself, although it is not easy to tell how widespread it became, since there was little incentive to record speeches for such transient and largely non-verbal entertainment, and few examples survive. This changes during the second half of the sixteenth century, at least in France, where speeches and dialogue for increasingly elaborate *mascarades* were provided and published by court poets such as Mellin de St-Gelais, Desportes and Ronsard.<sup>45</sup> The French examples confirm the continuing familiarity of the motif particularly, though in fairly abbreviated form, in the spoken introductions for chivalric sports known as *cartels*. These, like the jousting letters from the reigns of Edward III and Henry IV, were fictionalised versions of the written challenges that initiated tournament encounters. Saint-Gelais's address "Pour une partie d'armes Au Roy" thus introduces

Six Chevaliers de region estrange  
 Querans partout adventure et louenge [...] [Qui]  
 Ont cest Hyver mesuré longue espace  
 De Terre et Mer seulement pour avoir  
 De vous le bien et congé de vous voir...<sup>46</sup>

45 See, e.g., the various *cartel* and *mascarade* speeches among the "Opuscules" of SAINT-GELAIS, 1993-95: vol. 1, 12-92; DESPORTES, 1958; RONSARD, 1578.

46 SAINT-GELAIS, 1993-1995: vol. 1, 92, l. 5-14.

In “Autre Cartel pour le Roy Henri III”, Ronsard similarly presents “Trois guerriers inconnuz de nation estrange” who “Ont laissé leur pays desireux de louange”.<sup>47</sup> The trope is less common in the later sixteenth-century French *mascarades*, as the traditionally silent entertainments themselves became increasingly verbal, often following allegorical and amorous scenarios which were elaborated in speeches and dialogue by the performers.<sup>48</sup> However, a speech by Saint-Gelais from the 1550s does introduce envoys sent from Venus’ lands of the East, for whom the presenter will act as an interpreter because he understands “les langues obscures” from distant lands.<sup>49</sup>

Surviving examples in English from the later sixteenth century are very rare. The silent mask based on the “unexpected” entry of disguisers seems to have become increasingly associated with weddings. Two presenter-speeches for such marriage-masks survive, written by one Thomas Pound of Lincoln’s Inn, although neither draws on the trope of exotic visitors.<sup>50</sup> The only other known English example, however, not only elaborates the motif fully but gives insight into how such a show might have been put together. In 1572, the English poet George Gascoigne composed a presenter’s speech for a wedding at which a group of young male relatives had decided to “present a maske”. Most unusually, this speech was published in Gascoigne’s *Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* the following year.<sup>51</sup> Like Lydgate over a century earlier, Gascoigne has his presenter recount in detail an adventurous journey from Venice and around the Mediterranean, this time supposedly taken by the disguised maskers en route to the wedding. As in Henry VIII’s visit to Wolsey, an interpreter is then chosen from among the guests to translate for them, since “their englishe is but weake” (l. 363). A revealing headnote also explains how the speech came to be included. In their excitement, the young maskers

had already bought furniture of silks &c. and had caused their garments to be cut of the Venetian fashion. Nowe they began to imagine that [...] it would seeme somewhat obscure to haue Venetians presented [...] Whereupon they entreated Master Gascoigne to devise some verses [...] to render a good cause of the Venetians presence.<sup>52</sup>

The mask itself was clearly devised as the sudden arrival of the young men, elaborately disguised as noble strangers, to dance at the wedding celebration; the speech was only added later to rationalise their entertainment. It enhances their spectacular irruption

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47 RONSARD, 1578: 472.

48 See CORNILLIAT, 1995; RUEGGER, 1991.

49 SAINT-GELAIS, 1993-1995: vol 1, 88.

50 See PINCOMBE, 1987.

51 GASCOIGNE, 2000: 301-312.

52 *Ibid.*: 301.

into the festivities by imagining a fictionalised history linking the “Venetians” to the wedding families and giving an extended account of the tempestuous journeying that brought them there.

Such presenters’ speeches are effectively paratexts rather than fully dramatic scripts; but although they rarely give any concrete information about the entertainment to follow, they can offer valuable understanding of its purposes. This is clear in a late flowering of the exotic-visitor entertainment in Scotland that shows both how enduring and how international the motif, its themes and its purposes were, and how specifically it might engage with its political context. The speech was written for an entertainment presented at the court of the young king James VI of Scotland, most probably in December 1579 at the start of James’s personal reign at the age of thirteen. It is preserved in a manuscript collecting the poetic works of Alexander Montgomerie, one of the chief poets of the coterie who came to surround James in the early years of his adult reign. Titled “The Navigatioun”, it is a classic speech by a well-travelled presenter describing the arduous journey taken from Constantinople to Edinburgh by a group of foreign well-wishers, eager to see the “3ing and godly King” who has just begun his reign there.<sup>53</sup> It is full of familiar detail. The presenter heralds the arrival of his three companions “From Turkie, Egypt and from arabie” (l. 20). He comments on their strange clothing, pointing out that while he himself is a German wearing his own national dress, by their “contrare clething 3our Excellence sall ken / The Turk, the more and the Egyptien” (ll. 31-32). He tells how he encountered these three Eastern travellers in Constantinople and learned that they were planning a voyage to Scotland, having heard of the new king and wishing to visit him: “He is the chosen vessell of the Lord. / To sie this king nou glaidly wald we go” (ll. 82-83). An echo of the Magi’s visit, often referenced in the earlier entertainments, informs their words. The strangers then invite the Presenter to become their envoy, explaining that he is

[...] bothe welcome and richt necessar  
Vnto his grace our coming to declair.  
For 3e haif travellit throu mony lands  
And eviry language also vnderstands. (ll. 85-88)

The presenter will thus act as interpreter for the silent performers. The party set off on a journey that is traced through the Hellespont, past Rhodes, Crete, Malta and Sicily, up the west coast of Italy, through the straits of Gibraltar, on past Portugal to the English Channel. They pass the cliffs of Dover, sail up the East of England to the Bass Rock, and on to “the Porte of Leith”, to arrive at “3our graces hall” in Edinburgh. The detail of this

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53 MONTGOMERIE, 2000: vol. 1, 90-97, l. 78. For further discussion, see CARPENTER, 2019.

Mediterranean voyage remains remarkably consistent from Lydgate, through Gascoigne, to Montgomerie.

The Presenter's account of the journey is only the prelude to an entertainment of which, again, we know very little: he makes no mention of what the visitors will do on arrival. There is supporting evidence of the season of spectacular entertainment in the Scottish Treasurer's Accounts for December 1579, in payments for "certane mask claithis" for "his hienes violeris" in red and yellow taffeta with cloth of silver.<sup>54</sup> But these were accompanied by six fencing swords and daggers, suggesting some kind of indoor combat game. It may well be that the mask of the Turk, the Moor and the Egyptian was performed by the nobility rather than the musicians, with costume financed from beyond the royal accounts.

More than with many earlier examples, it is clear that political circumstances informed this entertainment. It relates directly to the moment in late 1579 when the thirteen-year-old James VI publicly took up his personal rule, moving from his protected childhood home of Stirling Castle to set up his court in Edinburgh. The opening of "The Navigatioun", addressed directly to the young king, honours him in terms which emphasise this new status. He is hailed as a bud coming into flower, "the bravest burgeoun brekking to the Rose"; the Council is urged to stand like trees about the youthful monarch, to "brek the storme befor it come to the". It is because of the wonder of this wise and learned new young king, compared to Solomon, that "All lands about sall feir thy Excellence / And com fra far to do thee reverence" (ll. 17-18). The speech seems explicitly designed to honour James's new authority as a figure to whom travellers, like the Magi, are drawn from afar: it is quite possible that like many previous examples, the performance was designed for Epiphany. It also pointedly raises a specific issue of political importance at this moment of James's reign—his relationship with England. The Presenter reports a conversation among the travellers as they sail along the South coast of England, asking each other:

"Vhat if the Quene wer deid?  
Quha suld be nixt or to the Croun succeed?"  
They follout furth this Argument so far,  
Syndrie wes sibbe bot ay 3our grace wes nar. (ll. 229-32)

James's known hopes for succession to the English crown are forthrightly incorporated into the fantasy of the journey.

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54 *The Royal Court of Scotland*, ed. CARPENTER: December 1579.

In all these ways, “The Navigatioun” appears to echo very closely the model that had been in place for over 200 years. Explicit topical reference works with Eastern exoticism, biblical allusion, and romanticised history and geography, in a journey of wondrous strangers to honour the host and his court. However, it is not clear how Montgomerie might have become familiar with the form. From what we know of his biography, it seems unlikely that he would have personally witnessed this theatrical form in either Scotland or England.<sup>55</sup> He appears to have spent much of his early adulthood in Europe, fighting in the wars in the Netherlands in the early 1570s, possibly visiting Spain, and almost certainly France in the years immediately before 1579.<sup>56</sup> This may have offered opportunities to encounter courtly *mascarades* elsewhere. Knowledge of entertainments like this was unlikely to spread through texts, but there is a hypothetical chance that Montgomerie read Gascoigne’s mask (published 1573), or even that he met the poet when both were fighting in the Netherlands.<sup>57</sup> France is a likelier textual source, since Montgomerie’s subsequent poetry was strongly influenced by French writing. He himself wrote, very much in the French style, “A Cartell of the Thre Ventrous Knichts”, which included a brief allusion to a voyage “past the gredy gulfe of Perse”.<sup>58</sup> The published *mascarade* speeches may have provided models for “The Navigatioun”, though significantly less close than the English poet’s.

There also seems a more direct French influence at play in this performance. Just before James VI moved down to Edinburgh from Stirling, his eminent French kinsman, Esmé Stuart, the Sieur d’Aubigny, arrived in Scotland from France. The young king welcomed his glamorous cousin with enthusiasm, quickly forming a warm attachment to him. From his first arrival d’Aubigny seems to have introduced James, brought up in Protestant restraint, to the flamboyant courtly culture of France; his influence shows in a marked increase in evidence of courtly performance-play that can be seen over the three years he spent in Scotland.<sup>59</sup> Montgomerie arrived back in Scotland from the continent at about

55 During the years of James VI’s minority, there is little evidence of courtly performance entertainment in Scotland, though masks at well-to-do marriages remain a possibility.

56 For full analysis of the evidence for Montgomerie’s early life, see LYALL, 2005: ch 2, pp. 33-61; on “The Navigatioun”, pp. 65-75.

57 GASCOIGNE, 2000: pp. xxviii-xxxviii.

58 MONTGOMERIE, 2000: vol. 1, 97-98. This *cartel* was possibly composed for the same season of entertainment, but seems not related to the “mask claithis” mentioned above, since the “ventrous knights” challenge James’s court to contest with spears rather than swords. David Parkinson points out that King James himself included a very similar *cartel*-challenge by “wandring knights” from “fornane vncouthe lands” in his “Epithalamion upon the Marques of Huntlies mariage”, an unfinished fragment of a wedding mask (MONTGOMERIE, 2000: vol. 2, 79).

59 *The Royal Court of Scotland*, ed. CARPENTER: entries between 1579 and 1582.

the same time, which, with other evidence, has led to speculation that he travelled from France in d'Aubigny's train. These circumstances not only point to a European influence on "The Navigatioun", but may enhance its particular political resonance. There seems to have been little international acclamation for James's formal accession: France was still supporting his mother, the imprisoned Mary Stuart, as the true monarch of Scotland, while England was suspicious of the young king and even more of the influence of the Roman Catholic d'Aubigny. It may well be that the exotic-visit mask presented in "The Navigatioun" was organised by d'Aubigny; it seems tacitly to parallel his own arrival, offering flatteringly affectionate and spectacular attention from beyond Scotland and performing theatrically the international recognition that had not been offered.

This last example of the exotic visitor trope plays with all the kinds of meanings the long-established tradition offered. It flatters and honours the young king by casting him as the magnetically attractive centre to which the exotic world beyond his realm is irresistibly drawn. It encourages him and his court to appropriate to themselves the splendour and adventurous spectacle of their imaginary visitors. But it also reflects more instrumentally on the realities of power, and encourages a perspective that looks beyond the local and familiar to the court's place in a wider international world. It stands, however, at the end of the tradition. Courtly entertainment in both France and England was already moving away from such largely unspoken spectacles into the more fully dramatic dialogue, song and spectacle of the early seventeenth-century masque.<sup>60</sup> While these often retained the central features of exotic or wonderful figures honouring the court and a cross-over between performers and spectators, the powerful simplicity of the exotic visitation entertainment that had flourished for so long is dissolved into more complex forms.

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60 See notes 15 and 48.

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