On New Year’s Day, 1611, King James VI of Scotland and I of England attended the performance of a masque in the Banqueting House of his court at Whitehall.\(^1\) Entitled \textit{Oberon, The Faery Prince}, the masque was the result of collaborative work by some of the greatest creative artists in England at the time. Its text was written by Ben Jonson; its songs were set to music by Ferrabosco; it was performed in costumes and on stage sets designed by Inigo Jones; its speaking parts were played by members of Shakespeare’s company, the King’s Men; its lively action included ballets devised by choreographers Confesse, Giles and Herne, and it concluded with courtly dances to the music of Robert Johnson.\(^2\) The patron and central figure of this glittering event was James’s elder son, Henry, who had been invested (at the Palace of Westminster) as Prince of Wales just six months earlier. Henry’s political coming-of-age had been celebrated throughout 1610, and the festivities may be seen as reaching their completion with this new-year masque for 1611. The title page of \textit{Oberon} in Jonson’s folio \textit{Workes} (1616) announces it as ‘A Masqve of Prince Henries’, indicating the young prince’s symbolic ownership of the work, and indeed

\(^1\) The subject of this essay has been chosen with Alasdair MacDonald firmly in mind: the masque took place exactly four hundred years before his retirement, concerns the Scottish royal family, was written by an author whom he greatly respects, and is of significance for its political references, dramatic form, poetic rhetoric and musical settings, all of which are known to be areas of interest to Alasdair. The essay is dedicated to him with grateful affection.

on 1st January 1611 it was Henry himself who played the title role of the ‘Faery Prince’.

Why was Oberon considered an appropriate subject for this significant political and cultural event? What is the relationship between the 1611 masque and the idea of supernatural beings, and in what ways does Jonson change both the genre and the ‘faery’ tradition? This essay will look closely at the masque itself in context, in order to answer these and related questions. It will also take the opportunity to celebrate the unique achievements of this early modern dramatic, musical and visual spectacle, a ‘minor masterpiece’ in which a variety of skills and senses combined to form what Shakespeare might aptly have described as ‘something rich and strange’.

By 1611 the masque, a richly expressive yet strangely hybrid art form, was a well-established mode of British court entertainment and political allegory. The baptism of Prince Henry in 1594 had itself been celebrated with masques at the Scottish court, and James’s reign in England from 1603 onwards had already given rise to at least a dozen new masques, mainly written by Jonson but also including works by Thomas Campion and Samuel Daniel. The ingredients of a masque are lavish visual effects, poetic dialogue, songs, instrumental music and dance, combined for the purposes of display, propaganda and celebration. The masque form also importantly bridges the gap between performers and spectators by incorporating members of the royal family and their court in symbolic roles and dances. By 1611 the masque had grown into a dramatic art which played on this complex mirroring between stage and audience, as well as between mythology and actuality. A similar duality of principle also underlies the two-part formal structure of Jacobean masques, with an antimasque preceding the main action and thereby prefiguring, in distorted or parodic mode, the content of the masque proper. This courtly entertainment allows little scope for doubt or ambiguity; threats of disruption embodied in the first part of the action are symbolically contained by, or banished from, the resolution of the second part. Chaos cedes to order; night gives way to day, and the hierarchies of court and state are reasserted.

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3 Butler, Stuart Court Masque (see above, n. 2), p. 188.
5 See the recent discussions by Ravelhofer, Early Stuart Masque (see above, n. 2), and Butler, Stuart Court Masque.
6 For a complete list of masques performed at the Jacobean court, see Butler, Stuart Court Masque, pp. 358–76.