The Banqueting House and *The Masque of Augurs*: Architecture and Metatheatricality in a Jacobean Masque

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Abstract: The Banqueting House in Whitehall was designed by Inigo Jones and built between 1619 and 1622. Its functions included the staging of masques, and Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Augurs* was the first to be presented there. Both works draw heavily on classical precedent and learning. This essay argues that appreciation of *The Masque of Augurs* depends on understanding the space that was used for its performance, and that Jonson purposely draws attention to the artificiality of the masque, and to the surroundings of the Banqueting House, in a way that we now term metatheatrical.

The Banqueting House in Whitehall was designed by Inigo Jones and built between 1619 and 1622. It was designed to fulfil a number of functions, of which the staging of masques was one, and on Twelfth Night, 1622, *The Masque of Augurs* by Ben Jonson was the first to be presented there. The masque contains numerous references to architecture, building, and the arts involved in the staging of the entertainment itself: it draws attention to its own artificiality and to the venue for the performance in the way that we now term metatheatrical.[1] This essay considers both the *Masque of Augurs* and the Banqueting House. It begins with a brief account of the circumstances in which the Banqueting House was built, and describes how the building would originally have appeared. It then considers *The Masque of Augurs*, examining the use that was made of the new performance space and the metatheatrical effects of Jonson's text. It concludes that a proper appreciation of each work – the building and the masque – can inform our understanding of the other.[2]

The Banqueting House is the third such building to have stood on the site. The first was a temporary structure of wood and canvas, erected in 1581 to receive French ambassadors in anticipation of a marriage treaty for Queen Elizabeth I. This was replaced in 1606 by a more substantial building in wood and stone, which burnt down in 1619. The decision to rebuild it – taken immediately despite an economic recession and the fact that the English crown was in financial difficulties – has been attributed to the expectations of a wedding between Prince Charles (the future King Charles I) and the Infanta of Spain. The proposed marriage, known as the Spanish Match, never came to fruition, but it dominated diplomatic activity during the last years of the reign of King James I. In the words of Per Palme, the rapid and costly rebuilding was 'clearly prompted by the ostentatious diplomatic technique of the day and by the prospective celebrations of the marriage alliance.'[3]

Inigo Jones had become Surveyor of the King's Works in 1615, but had been an influential Court architect for some years before that as Surveyor to the Prince of Wales. He had studied classical and modern Italian architectural theories, including Daniele Barbaro's 1567 edition of *De Architectura* by Vitruvius (the 1st century Roman authority whose work was the only surviving Roman architectural treatise) and Andrea Palladio's 1570 work *I*

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[1] *OED* defines the term 'metatheatre' as 'Theatre which draws attention to its unreality, esp. by the use of a play within a play; (also) those particular parts of a drama which exemplify this device'.

[2] All references to *The Masque of Augurs* are to the version in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), V, pp.581-610. For the sake of brevity, the title is shortened in these notes to *MA*.

[3] Per Palme, *The Triumph of Peace: a Study of the Whitehall Banqueting House* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957), p.5.

Quattro Libri dell'Architettura, which was also inspired ultimately by Vitruvius. He had also travelled in Italy, where he met the architect and writer Vincenzo Scamozzi, author of the 1615 work *L'Idea dell'Architettura Universale*, and visited many of the buildings illustrated in Palladio. For Jones, the rebuilding of the Banqueting House was an opportunity to demonstrate 'his concept, totally new in England, of a monumental and ordered architecture based on antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, in the most sensitive context, and harness them to the expression of the grandeur of his monarch.'[4]

A detailed discussion of Jones' sources is beyond the scope of this essay, but Palladio's influence is strong. John Summerson has observed, for example, that the Banqueting House interior owes much to Palladio's interpretation of a Vitruvian basilica, which had classical associations with the administration of justice (one of the functions of the king) as well as obvious later associations with Christianity; whilst the exterior is partly based on a Palladio study for a town house.[5] The design as a whole was a display of classical learning, as well as of the taste that Jones had acquired in Italy.

The building is broadly rectangular in plan. It is two storeys high, above a raised basement. The main elevations, facing east and west, consist of two ranges of seven windows, flanked by superimposed orders, Ionic below and Composite above (Figure 1): the side windows by pilasters, which are paired at the ends of each facade, and the central bays (which are slightly projected) by columns. The stonework is mostly rusticated, but the columns and pilasters are smooth and unfluted: the classical features stand out (Figure 2).

Figure 1: West elevation

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Figure 2: Detail of west elevation, showing the advanced central bays, rusticated stonework and unfluted column

Photograph © Jeremy Newton 2012

[4] J. Newman, 'Inigo Jones and the Politics of Architecture', in Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake (eds.), *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp.229-255, p.235.
[5] John Summerson, *Inigo Jones* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), pp.50-5.

Originally, the facade had a subtle polychromy: the ground floor was built from honey-coloured Oxfordshire stone, the walls above that were pinkish Northamptonshire stone, and only the orders and entablature were in white Portland stone, so highlighting these classical features still further. (The application of Portland stone to the entire facade was only done in the 19th century.) [6]

The main feature of the interior is a single great chamber, reached by a modest staircase at the north end of the building (Figures 3 and 4).[7] The chamber was designed to be 110 feet long, 55 feet wide and 55 feet high: a double cube, which proportions are characteristic of a Palladian-Vitruvian basilica.[8] It is divided vertically by a narrow gallery; horizontally, the long walls are divided into seven window bays, separated below the gallery by engaged Ionic columns and above by Corinthian pilasters. There are three stone doorways in the north wall, the central one being the main entrance to the room from the staircase. There are now three doorways in the south wall too, though in 1622 there was no central door: instead, behind where the throne now stands, there was a niche or apse – another feature of the basilica – semi-circular and half the height of the building. This niche was removed shortly after construction, around 1625.[9]
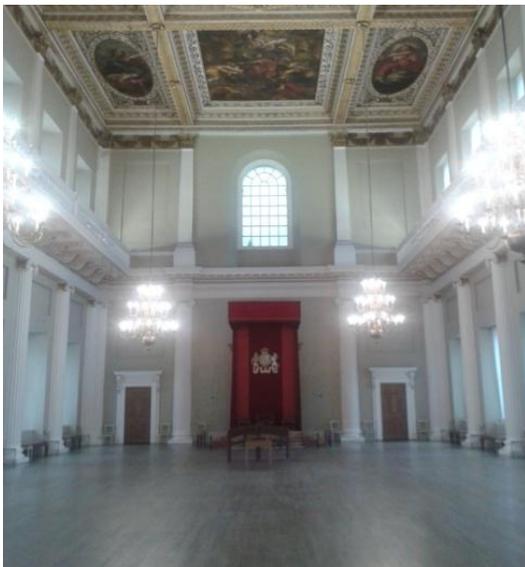

Figure 3: Interior, looking from the main entrance towards the south wall
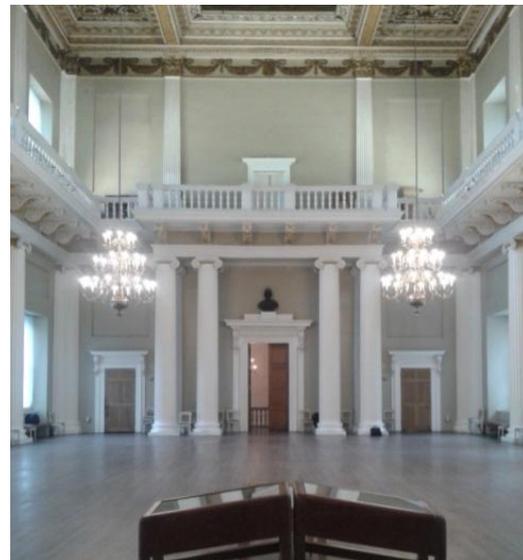
Photograph © Jeremy Newton 2012

Figure 4: Interior, looking from the south end towards the main entrance

Photograph © Jeremy Newton 2012

It is difficult to imagine how extraordinary the new building must have seemed to Jones' contemporaries. It dominated the approach to Whitehall Palace (Figure 5), and its scale and appearance set it apart from the Tudor buildings amongst which it stood: John

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[6] John Charlton, *The Banqueting House* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1964), p.18. Summerson, p.56.

[7] The most famous feature of the interior, the great Rubens ceiling glorifying James I, was only installed in 1635 – more than a decade after the inauguration of the building – for which reason it is not discussed further in this essay.

[8] The actual internal dimensions are 120 feet long by 53 feet wide, corresponding to the plan of the previous banqueting house, but Jones' estimate and the building accounts indicate that Jones intended for it to be a strict double cube. See Newman, p.236.

[9] Giles Worsley, *Inigo Jones and the European Classicist Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p.171.

Chamberlain wrote in April 1622 that it 'is too faire and nothing sutable to the rest of the house.'[10] Michael Leapman has observed that there are few other references to it in contemporary correspondence and journals, and suggests that people simply did not know what to make of it.[11]

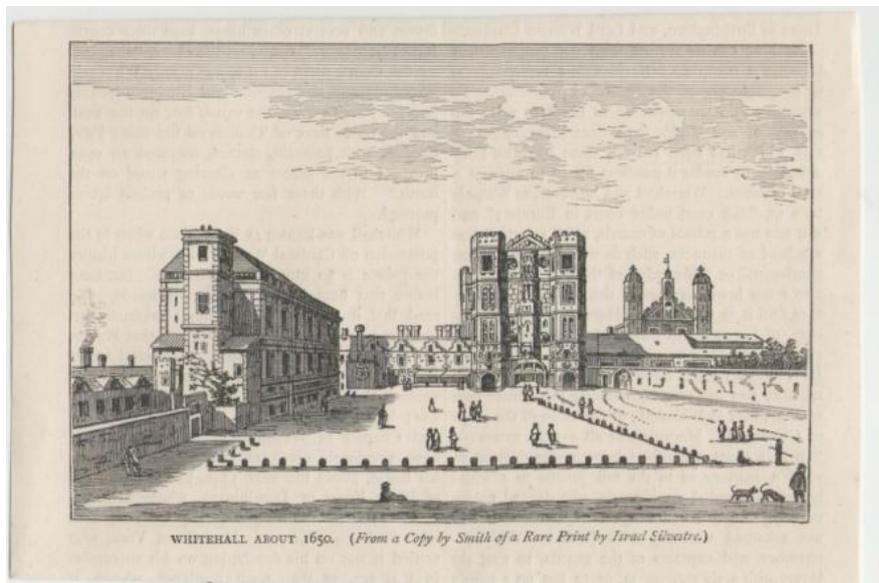WHITEHALL ABOUT 1650. (From a Copy by Smith of a Rare Print by Israel Silvestre.)

Figure 5: Engraving of Whitehall circa 1650, from a copy of a print by Israel Silvestre, showing the Banqueting House on the left and the Holbein Gate on the right

Photograph © Jeremy Newton 2012 from copy in private collection

It was for this remarkable new space that *The Masque of Augurs* was devised, and this essay will shortly turn to consider Jonson's text. First, though, it is necessary to understand how the interior was arranged for masques generally, because the performance derived much of its significance from the way in which the space was used.[12]

For a masque, the room would be fitted out with seating in the form of temporary scaffolding on three sides, and richly decorated with tapestries. The banks of seats blocked out the lower windows, so the hall was lit by torches. A stage was erected at the north end; at the south end, the king was seated on a dais under a canopy – presumably in the niche until this was removed – and the perspective stage scenery was drawn to be seen from that viewpoint. The stage and the royal dais formed the two main foci of the event, with a carpeted processional space between them running the length of the hall. This was where the masquers would dance, and it was along this carpet that characters from the entertainment would process to address the king. (Given the basilica form of the hall, with the apse at the end, the procession from stage to dais must have been endowed with a ritual, quasi-religious nature.)

Structurally, *The Masque of Augurs* follows the same broad pattern as other Stuart masques. Typically there would be one or two antimasques – originally called 'antic-

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[10] Quoted in Suzanne Groom, David Souden, Jane Spooner and Sally Dixon-Smith, *Discover the Banqueting House* (Kingston: Historic Royal Palaces, 2011), p.19.

[11] Michael Leapman, *Inigo* (London: Hodder Headline, 2003), pp.194-5.

[12] The description that follows of the typical arrangements for a masque is based on Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642,* 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.164-171.

masques', which term better describes their grotesque nature;[13] a main masque whose characters are primarily taken from allegory, myth or classical history; a series of dances performed by prominent members of the royal family and the court; and the event would culminate in the singing of a panegyric directly to the king.

There is not space in this essay for a close reading of the entire work, or for commenting on its political and ethical aspects. Instead, a brief summary of the main episodes in *The Masque of Augurs* will have to suffice to provide context for the specific passages under discussion. The antimasques (lines 1 to 225) begin with a number of 'low' characters who trespass into the court buttery with a view to presenting an entertainment. They include Notch, a brewer's clerk, and Vangoose, a Dutchman described as a 'rare artist' and 'projector of masques'. They present a display of dancing bears, which is accompanied by a – surprisingly scatological – ballad. For the second antimasque, Vangoose conjures up what is described as 'a perplexed dance of straying and deformed pilgrims taking several paths.'[14] The main masque begins after the pilgrims' dance: they flee as Apollo 'breaks forth' from the light above the stage. As Apollo descends, he summons his children, who form the Chorus for the masque, and they sing to the king (lines 226 to 274). The aristocratic masquers are led out by torchbearers, and a number of dances are presented, including a dance of augury (lines 275 to 325). Apollo then approaches the king and sings to him of the glorious future prognosticated for the Stuart dynasty (lines 326 to 341). The entertainment concludes with the discovery, in the 'heaven' above the stage, of Jove with the senate of the gods. Apollo re-ascends; Apollo, Jove and the Earth then sing verses that confirm the augury that has been made, and the Chorus again praises the king before the final dance of the masquers (lines 342 to 373).

Jonson's stage directions, though brief, are informative about how the space within the Banqueting House was used, and the associated changes in distance – both physical distance and aesthetic distance – between performers and audience. The opening stage direction says '*The first antimasque had for the scene the court buttery hatch.*'[15] The scenery would have been moveable, and the antimasques would have been played entirely on the stage, with the players separated from the audience by a proscenium arch. However, this physical separation breaks down in the main masque, once Apollo has descended from the light:

>*Apollo, descended, showed them where the king sat, and sung forward.*

APOLLO   Behold the love and care of all the gods,
                   King of the ocean and the Happy Isles
                  That whilst the world about him is at odds,
                  Sits crownèd lord here of himself, and smiles –

CHORUS   To see the erring mazes of mankind,
                  Who seek for that doth punish them to find.

>*Then he advanced with them to the King.*[16]

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[13] *OED* defines the term 'antimasque' as 'A grotesque interlude between the acts of a masque, to which it served as a foil, and of which it was at first often a burlesque. (Sometimes made *antic-masque*.)'.

[14] *MA*, 223-4.

[15] *MA*, 1.

[16] *MA*, 248-55.

Physically, the performers were now using the floor of the hall: the effect of moving from behind the proscenium arch towards the throne was to bring together the mythological space of the stage with the real space of the hall and the royal dais. The boundaries between the world of the entertainment and the world of the court would be further blurred when the aristocratic masquers – Prince Charles, George Villiers and several lesser courtiers[17] – were led out, costumed as augurs, to present their dances on the processional space; and again at the climax of the event, where the stage direction reads, '*The Revels. After which, Apollo went up to the King and sung.*'[18] The real world and the mythical world were now one.

The manipulation of aesthetic distance in this way is not at all unusual in the Stuart masque – as has already been noted, it was part of the conventional structure – but it takes on another dimension in *The Masque of Augurs* specifically because of the frequency with which the text refers, directly or indirectly, to the arts involved in the masque and to the building in which it is being performed. This essay turns now to consider some of the key passages.
In the first antimasque, Notch explains why his troupe has come to court:

> I, Peter Notch, clerk, hearing that the Christmas invention was drawn dry at court, and that neither the king's poet nor his architect had wherewithal left to entertain so much as a baboon of quality... out of my allegiance to wit, drew in some other friends that have, as it were, presumed out of their own naturals to fill up the vacuum with some pretty presentation.[19]

The irony is clear. In the spectacular surroundings of Jones' new building, on the rare and extravagant occasion of a masque, Jonson has Notch suggest that both Jones and Jonson are creatively bankrupt. This idea is amplified by Vangoose, who comments that 'de inventors be barren' and promises instead 'some dainty new ting' that has never been seen before.[20] From the start, then, Jonson metatheatrically highlights matters of authorship, creativity and novelty, and this continues throughout the antimasques. When Notch asks for the dancing bears to be admitted 'if not for a masque, then for an antic-masque,'[21] Jonson is likewise emphasising the theatricality of the event. He does so again when, after the dancing bears, Vangoose offers to conjure up a pageant involving 'de groat Turkschen... de Tartar Cham, met de groat king of Mogul.'[22] The Groom expresses concern, in terms that highlight – again, ironically – the huge space that they are in: 'I do not like the Mogul, nor the great Turk, nor the Tartar; their names are somewhat too big for the room.'[23]
The main masque opens with another metatheatrical flourish. As Apollo descends, he sings:

> It is no dream; you all do wake and see.
> Behold who comes! Far-shooting Phoebus, he
> That can both hurt and heal; and with his voice
> Rear towns, and make societies rejoice;
> That taught the Muses all their harmony,
> And men the tuneful art of augury.[24]

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[17] *MA,* p.604 n.

[18] *MA,* 325.

[19] *MA,* 62-8.

[20] *MA,* 75-8. Vangoose's cod-Dutch accent is emphasised in the printed text, where his speeches are set in a heavy Gothic typeface.

[21] *MA,* 113.

[22] *MA,* 188-91.

[23] *MA,* 201-2.

[24] *MA,* 227-32.

Jones' few surviving drawings for the masque design show that the entrance of Apollo must have been truly spectacular, yet his first words proclaim that 'it is no dream,' that the presence of the god within the Banqueting House is real.[25] Apollo then alludes to his own associations with music (an essential element of the masque form), architecture (the walls of Troy were raised by the sound of his lyre) and divination (the subject of this particular masque). Apollo's children are also closely associated with the arts of the masque: for example, Orpheus, the son of Apollo and Calliope (the muse of poetry), is associated with song; and Linus, the son of Apollo and Terpsichore (the muse of dance) is associated with music. By incorporating all these allusions – indeed, spelling them out explicitly in the extensive marginalia to the printed text that was given to masque-goers – Jonson invites the audience to reflect on the nature of the masque and the location of its performance, as much as its ostensible content.

Jonson goes on to link the inauguration of the Banqueting House with the establishment of the Roman College of Augurs. Apollo sings directly to the king that Jove has commanded him 'To visit thee, / And in thine honour with my music rear / A college here / Of tuneful augurs.'[26] As Martin Butler notes, 'Jonson imaginatively links the celebration of the Banqueting House with the praise of Prince Charles and the masquers by representing them as the college of aristocratic priests who inhabit the new structure and give support and divine endorsement to James's state.'[27]

The sole surviving sketch of Jones' backdrop for *The Masque of Augurs* shows a proscenium arch, with a perspective view of an avenue of classical buildings, leading to a circular, domed temple with pedimented portico – presumably the College of Augurs – with an aperture in the sky above to allow the senate of the gods to be discovered. Roy Strong suggests that Jones regarded *The Masque of Augurs* as 'a vehicle for an architectural statement as if to emphasise the relationship of his stage buildings to the ones he was actually erecting.'[28] The masque is performed in a classical building designed by Jones, against the backdrop of another classical building of Jones' design. In the way that it echoes the classical design of the venue, Jones' stage design is every bit as metatheatrical as Jonson's text.

Jonson's endnote acknowledges the collaborative nature of the masque. Jonson credits himself with the 'expression' of the masque, Jones with the 'scene', and the two of them jointly with the 'invention'.[29] D.J. Gordon has explained that 'invention' was understood to mean literally 'the finding of the subject of the poem'; whereas 'expression' refers to the words by which that invention is conveyed.[30] Many of the earlier masques on which Jonson and Jones had collaborated are described as having been 'invented' by Jonson alone but, in the case of *The Masque of Augurs*, Jones and Jonson jointly determined the theme, which seems apt for an entertainment celebrating the inauguration of the new building.

Jonson's text has been described as a 'pyrotechnic display of learning on the art of augury in classical antiquity,'[31] just as Jones' building and scenery were exercises in using classical architectural forms. Throughout the masque, Jonson repeatedly draws the attention of the audience both to the artificiality of the performance and to the new room in which it is

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[25] Jones' surviving drawings, of Apollo and of Jove with the Senate of the Gods, are in the Devonshire Collection at Chatsworth House. See: http://art.chatsworth.org/search/keywords/augurs

[26] *MA,* 258-62.

[27] *MA,* p.600 n.

[28] John Harris, Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong (eds.), *King's Arcadia: Inigo Jones and the Stuart Court* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1973), pp.132-3.

[29] *MA,* 374-8.

[30] D.J. Gordon, 'Poet and Architect: The Intellectual Setting of the Quarrel between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 12 (1949), pp.152-78.

being held. An appreciation of the design and novelty of the venue informs our understanding of the masque, and the masque itself illuminates the classical, royal and religious associations of the basilica form on which the Banqueting House interior was based.

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