

Entertaining Royal Visitors: Performing the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

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Of all the many entertainments, plays, shows, and masques performed before English monarchs, we only know of two that are adaptations of the biblical story of the Queen of Sheba's visit to the court of King Solomon. Interestingly, these two performances took place when the monarch was hosting a visiting royal: *Sapientia Solomonis* was performed by the Westminster Boys on 17 January 1566 before Elizabeth I and her visitor, Princess Cecilia of Sweden; and a masque, generally referred to as 'Solomon and the Queen of Sheba', was performed at Theobalds in late July 1606 before James VI & I and his visitor, Christian IV of Denmark. That this theme was chosen for the entertainment of a visiting royal is perhaps not a complete surprise, but it does invite numerous questions. For instance, at each performance, the monarch and their visitor were the same gender—what, therefore, were the (gendered) implications of this fact? Likewise, both Elizabeth and James sought to depict themselves as contemporary Solomons, and it seems that these entertainments reflect this desire—but is this the only reading of the entertainments? This paper will therefore consider both the performances of the entertainments, and the religio-political context of the royal visits, to argue that the shows are an exercise in political theatre that was as much about counselling the monarch as entertaining them, while also emphasising the way that biblical stories crossed cultural boundaries. While Elizabeth and James might have been contemporary Solomons, were Cecilia and Christian really like the Queen of Sheba who visited because they 'heard of the fame of Solomon'? (I Kings 10:1).