

The Context for the Text: The Masque Entertainments of the Egerton-Hastings Family

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ABSTRACT Vanessa Wilkie argues that the Egerton-Hastings family had a long-established practice of literary patronage that involved commissioning and hosting masque entertainments in their homes to signal major legal victories and familial career advancements. John Marston's *Entertainment at Ashby* marked the 1607 Act of Parliament that ended a major inheritance lawsuit, John Milton's 1631 *Arcades* celebrated the family's victory in the Castlehaven trials, and Milton's *Comus* served as the entertainment at the Earl of Bridgewater's installation as president of the Marches of Wales. This essay introduces Marston's 1607 masque as part of what should be considered a trio of masques, not just a duo of Miltonic masques, and thus more accurately frames all three occasions and texts. The essay also narrows the possible date range of the performance of Milton's *Arcades*. This reading expands our understanding of the genre and function of elite household entertainments and masques. **KEYWORDS:** John Milton; John Marston; Alice Egerton; seventeenth-century masques; women and literary patronage

❧ IN 1607, HENRY AND ELIZABETH HASTINGS, the Earl and Countess of Huntingdon, hosted her family and their friends for two days of sprightly and lavish entertainments, which included a masque written by John Marston. In the early 1630s, the extended family again gathered, this time at Harefield Place, the home of the Countess of Huntingdon's mother, Alice Spencer Stanley Egerton, the Dowager Countess of Derby. The family feasted and revelers were entertained by a masque written by a young John Milton. Just a few years later, in 1634, another of Alice's daughters, Frances Egerton, joined her husband, John, Earl of Bridgewater, in hosting family and close friends on yet another occasion, this time at Ludlow Castle, on the England-Wales border. The children of the family performed in another masque written by Milton. These celebrations were certainly not the only times over the course of twenty-seven years that the Egerton-Hastings extended family and close friends

came together, but all three of these occasions were special, as they included grand masques penned by rising stars of the English Renaissance. As courtiers of the age, the Egerton-Hastings family and their elite friends were no strangers to elaborate entertainments, nor were they new to the world of literary spectacle. While the Egerton-Hastings men are most often associated with their political posts, the women in this family are most remembered for their patronage, which was truly a family enterprise. Like other noble families of the era, the Egerton-Hastings family promoted their dynastic networks through literary patronage and masque entertainments.

Elites in Tudor-Stuart England were also accustomed to elaborately hosting their royals, and this family was no exception. Alice and her second husband, Thomas Egerton, hosted Queen Elizabeth at their home, Harefield Place in Middlesex, on July 29, 1602.¹ A year later, it is likely that the couple assisted at the home of Alice's nephew Sir Robert Spencer as he hosted the new Stuart queen, Anna of Denmark, at Althorp during her June 1603 progression through England.² For decades, scholars considered masques to be iterations of royal court culture and exclusively political, and they debated which royal figure was at the center of Jacobean and Caroline cultural production. Working from a top-down model, they argued that early seventeenth-century English culture originated at court and radiated outward to include elite households that commissioned entertainments to host the court.³ Masques performed in country seats and without a royal audience have been referred to as acts of "oppositional politics," occasional literature, estate entertainments,

1. *Queen Elizabeth's Progresses*, vol. 4, part 1, *The Queen's Entertainment by the Countess of Derby, at Harefield Place, Middlesex, in July 1602* (London, 1821), 12–13. The queen's visit to Harefield is also recounted in J. Norris Brewer, *London and Middlesex . . .*, vol. 4 (London, 1816), 572–73.

2. Ben Jonson, *A Particular Entertainment of the Queene and Prince Their Highnesse to Althorpe . . .* (London, 1604); John Leeds Barroll, *Anna of Denmark, Queen of England: A Cultural Biography* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2001), 64.

3. This is a broad field with an extensive literature regarding patronage, court, and women as patrons in the Tudor-Stuart eras. For an overview, see David M. Bergeron, *Textual Patronage in English Drama, 1570–1640* (Aldershot, U.K., 2006); *Early Modern Women's Manuscript Writing: Selected Papers from the Trinity/Trent Colloquium*, ed. Victoria E. Burke and Jonathan Gibson (Aldershot, U.K., 2004); *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450–1700*, ed. James Daybell (Aldershot, U.K., 2004); *Albion's Classicism: The Visual Arts in Britain, 1550–1660*, ed. Lucy Gent (New Haven, Conn., 1995); *Henrietta Maria: Piety, Politics and Patronage*, ed. Erin Griffey (Aldershot, U.K., 2008); *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*, ed. Margaret Patterson Hannay (Kent, Ohio, 1985); Barbara J. Harris, "Women and Politics in Early Tudor England," *Historical Journal* 33, no. 2 (June 1990): 259–81; *Patronage in the Renaissance*, ed. Guy Fitch Lytle and Stephen Orgel (Princeton, N.J., 1981); *The Stuart Court and Europe: Essays in Politics and Political Culture*, ed. R. Malcolm Smuts (Cambridge, 1996); Retha M. Warnicke, *Women of the English Renaissance and Reformation* (Westport, Conn., 1983); and Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540–1620* (Urbana, Ill., 1984).

or pastoral entertainments.⁴ It has even been debated whether an entertainment performed in estate without a monarch present should indeed be called a masque.⁵ Scholars have argued that elites commissioned household masques for diverse reasons: to host a monarch, to celebrate elite marriages, for Twelfth Night, for religious festivals, and for secular festivals.⁶ Yet none of the three masques that the Egerton-Hastings family commissioned without a royal present are motivated by any of these occasions. These three performances, therefore, expand our understanding of the genre and function of elite household entertainments and masques.

In contrast to a top-down account of such entertainments, Malcolm Smuts and James Knowles have argued for a broader understanding of courtly cultural production and masque entertainments. Smuts contends that for seventeenth-century peers, “The court’s great aristocratic households influenced each other and undoubtedly shaped the king’s patronage.”⁷ Smuts does believe that masques were “essentially creations of royal households,” but he creates a space to conceive of the influence peers had on that culture.⁸ More recently, Knowles has pushed this perspective even farther by recognizing “the vitality of a multi-centered society ruled but not dominated by the court, with more diverse voices and forms.”⁹ Smuts and Knowles shift the emphasis of masques away from being viewed primarily as royal and political, allowing for a better understanding of the patronage and entertainment habits of elite dynastic families like the Egerton-Hastings family, who commissioned masques for royal visits and on occasions when no monarch was present. Elsewhere Knowles argues that “These entertainments, performed away from court and often without the royal audience of the masque, raise complex and interesting issues.”¹⁰ The work of Smuts and Knowles firmly demonstrates that masques performed in elite homes without a monarch present can, and in fact should, be read as masques. It also provides a critical lens

4. David Norbrook, “The Reformation of the Masque,” in *The Court Masque*, ed. David Lindley (Manchester, 1984), 94.

5. Cedric C. Brown, *John Milton’s Aristocratic Entertainments* (Cambridge, 1985), 544; Mary Ann McGuire, “Milton’s *Arcades* and the Entertainment Tradition,” *Studies in Philology* 75, no. 4 (1978): 451–71; Norbrook, “The Reformation of the Masque,” 94; Stephen Orgel, “The Case for Comus,” *Representations* 81, no. 1 (2003): 31–45; John Malcolm Wallace, “Milton’s *Arcades*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 58, no. 4 (October 1959): 627–36.

6. Kevin Curran, *Marriage, Performance, and Politics at the Jacobean Court* (Farnham, U.K., 2009), 5; Suzanne Westfall, “What Revels Are in Hand?: Performances in the Great Households,” in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford, 2002), 271–72.

7. Malcolm Smuts, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Change at the Court of James I,” in *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. Linda Levy Peck (Cambridge, 1991), 104–5.

8. Smuts, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Change,” 107.

9. James Knowles, *Politics and Political Culture in the Court Masque* (New York, 2015), 7–8; see also R. Malcolm Smuts, “Progresses and Court Entertainments,” in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Kinney, 283.

10. James Knowles, “Marston, Skipwith and *The Entertainment at Ashby*,” in *English Manuscript Studies 1100–1700*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Beal and Jeremy Griffiths (Toronto, 1992), 138.

for more accurately considering how and why elite families like the Egerton-Hastings family relied on masque entertainments to convey specific images and mark particular occasions. In this essay, I rely on definitions provided by Knowles, Smuts, Stephen Orgel, and Suzanne Westfall, all of whom identify elite masque entertainments as celebratory and indicative of the interests of the people in the household.¹¹

Situating the entertainment within a larger family context requires consideration of what Martin Butler calls the “triangulation” between the reason an event was held *and* the text that was created.¹² Whereas literary critics have prioritized the texts, and these Miltonic texts in particular, this essay emphasizes the value of the context. The moments when the Egerton-Hastings family chose to commission masques and host these entertainments coincided with major events in their own lives. Marston’s masque marked the 1607 Act of Parliament that ended the family’s inheritance lawsuit against William Stanley, sixth Earl of Derby. Milton’s *Arcades* celebrated the family’s victory in the Castlehaven trials of 1631. Milton’s *Comus* served as the entertainment at the Earl of Bridgewater’s official installation as president of the Marches of Wales. This trio of masques was commissioned to celebrate and mark legal victories and career advancements that stabilized and elevated the entire family.

These three occasions also speak to the gendered nature of work within early modern elite families. Historians like Anthony Fletcher and Barbara Harris have established that the gendered roles of early modern elite men and women can and should be viewed as “careers,” wherein the work women did within the family, like securing marriages, was as significant to the household as the administrative service of men.¹³ Literary scholars have viewed the Earl of Bridgewater’s installation as a moment of career advancement, celebrated with a masque penned by Milton. In this essay, I argue that the family also commissioned the *Entertainment at Ashby* and *Arcades* to mark the career successes of Alice Egerton, Dowager Countess of Derby. Winning a thirteen-year inheritance suit, arranging three successful marriages for her daughters, and navigating the horrors of the Castlehaven trials on behalf of her daughter and granddaughter all speak to her mastery of the maternal career expected of elite women in the early modern period.

Focusing on context rather than on texts alone develops our understanding of early modern elite patronage and masque culture and provides a useful and

11. Stephen Orgel, “Case for Comus,” 32; Westfall, ““What Revels are in Hand?”” 272. Martin Butler also includes mention of all three Egerton-Hastings entertainments in his complete appendix, “A Calendar of Masques and Entertainments, 1603–1641,” in *The Stuart Court Masque and Political Culture* (Cambridge, 2008), 358–76. Butler makes no distinction in his appendix between masques and entertainments, although he defines the criteria for inclusion on his list.

12. Butler, *The Stuart Court Masque*, 6.

13. Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500–1800* (New Haven, Conn., 1995), 83; Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450–1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford, 2002), 5.

more precise backdrop for these specific performances and texts. While literary critics have considered the two Miltonic masques together, they have not seen Milton's works as part of a larger and longer-term familial patronage pattern. This essay introduces Marston's 1607 masque as part of what should be considered a trio of masques, not just a duo of Miltonic masques, and thus more accurately frames all three occasions and texts. The essay also narrows the possible date range of the performance of Milton's *Arcades*. This kind of analysis requires knowledge of a family biography over time, not just a bibliography. The Egerton-Hastings case study reveals an elite familial culture of hosting entertainments and commissioning masques over the course of decades, only after they had achieved legal triumphs and significant familial career advancement.

Entertainment at Ashby: The 1607 Inheritance Settlement

The year 1607 was a landmark one for the Egerton-Hastings family. Alice's first husband, Ferdinando Stanley, had died suddenly in 1594, leaving his thirty-four-year-old widow with three young daughters to care for. Ferdinando's will stipulated that Alice and their daughters were to inherit his land holdings, but his brother William was adamant that the Stanley lands were to pass to him as the male heir.¹⁴ William, Alice, and their families battled for thirteen years until the feud came to an end with a private Act of Parliament in 1607. William was ordered to pay his nieces £20,400: £8,000 cash and £11,200 for lands he wanted to purchase back from them, and £1,200 for lands he had illegally sold prior to the settlement. The Act of Parliament also finalized the distribution of estates and lands.¹⁵

The settlement brought prosperity to the Stanley women and their fortunate husbands, who were also listed by name in the Act of Parliament. To commemorate this achievement and their bright futures, the family invited friends to Ashby de la Zouch, the seat of Henry and Elizabeth Hastings, for the entertainment by John Marston and revelry. When we consider the life narratives of the Stanley women and their husbands, it is remarkably appropriate that the family chose to mark this occasion with literary spectacle. Alice learned the art of literary patronage from Ferdinando. She then transformed it and instilled it in her children and their families. During their marriage, Ferdinando was one of the most renowned literary and theatrical patrons of his age. He established Lord Strange's Men, "the company from which nearly all of

14. "The Last Will and Testament of Ferdinando Stanley, fifth earl of Derby," October 12, 1594, PROB 11/84/243, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA).

15. "An act for the establishing and assurance of divers of the possessions and hereditaments of Ferdinando [Stanley] late earl of Derby," ca. 1607, C 89/10/33, TNA. For a contemporary manuscript copy, see "Act of Parliament for settling disputes between heir male & coheir-esses of Ferdinando Earle of Derby & for assuring Estates," E(B)/0053, Northamptonshire Record Office.

Shakespeare's subsequent partners in the Lord Chamberlain's Men were to come."¹⁶ Ferdinando and Alice were central figures in the realm of Elizabethan patronage. Shortly after Ferdinando's death, the dowager countess sponsored Lord Strange's Men for a single performance in Winchester in 1594. At the event, the troupe performed under the name The Countess of Derby's Men.¹⁷

In celebrating their 1607 legal victory with a literary entertainment, the Egerton-Hastings family followed a pattern of patronage that stretched back beyond the family's first patriarch. Lawrence Manley and Sally-Beth MacLean have established that for the Stanley line, "a tradition of patronage was developed to support the family's new prestige in the Tudor era . . . and to advance their influence in the north-west of England, at court, and through touring, across the new Tudor nation."¹⁸ The Egerton-Hastings family celebrated their Stanley inheritance by adapting the Stanley tradition of literary and theatrical patronage. Although they drew on the contemporary Stuart genre of masque entertainments, their motivations for patronage were similar to those of their Elizabethan kin: demonstrating familial grandeur and longevity and celebrating their influence.

The Entertainment at Ashby is replete with pastoral and cosmic imagery, and it honors Alice's ambition to secure status and fortune for her family:

O wee are full of Joye no breaste more light,
But those who owe yow theirs by Natures right
From whome vouchsafe this present. Tis a woork
wherein strange miracles & wonders lurke
For know yt Lady whose ambition towers
Only to this to be termd worthy of yours
whose forehead I coulde crowne wth clearest rayes
but yt her praise is, she abhors much praise¹⁹

A close examination of this stanza indicates that Marston wrote the entertainment to celebrate the outcome of the 1607 Act of Parliament. In the lines "But those who

16. Lawrence Manley and Sally-Beth MacLean, *Lord Strange's Men and Their Plays* (New Haven, Conn., 2014), 1.

17. Manley and MacLean, *Lord Strange's Men*, 325; French Fogle, "'Such a Rural Queen': The Countess Dowager of Derby as Patron," in *Patronage in Late Renaissance England: Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar, 14 May 1977*, ed. French R. Fogle and Louis A. Knafla (Los Angeles, 1983), 14; Alfred Harbage, *Annals of English Drama, 975-1700*, ed. Samuel Schoenbaum (Philadelphia, Pa., 1964), 297, 301-2; Yoshiko Kawachi, *Calendar of English Renaissance Drama, 1558-1642* (New York, 1986), 76.

18. Manley and MacLean, *Lord Strange's Men*, 3.

19. "Presentation copy of the *Entertainment at Ashby* made by John Marston for Alice, Countess Dowager of Derby," ca. 1607, EL 34 B 9, lines 149-56, Huntington Library (hereafter HEH). There is another contemporary manuscript copy of *The Entertainment at Ashby*, Sloane MS 848, British Library.

owe yow theirs by Natures right, / From whome vouchsafe this present,” Marston acknowledges that the host and hostess of the event are indebted to Alice for protecting their “Natures right”—meaning Elizabeth’s place as one of the Stanley coheiresses of Ferdinando Stanley. Marston follows this sentiment with mention of “strange miracles” done by “yt Lady whose ambition towers.” Towering ambition certainly illustrates Alice’s attitude in securing Ferdinando’s inheritance for their daughters against his brother’s claims. And, the overwhelming success that the Stanley women and their families had in navigating seventeenth-century land laws in their pursuits against the Earl of Derby could aptly be described as a miracle.²⁰

The masque also speaks to the theme of the honorable and now stable lineages of the hosts. Twice, Marston uses the language of heraldic imagery to celebrate the union of the Stanley and Hastings lines in the Earl and Countess of Huntingdon:

But every night upon a Forrest syde
on wch an Eagle pearcheth they abyde
and honor her with their moste rayshed light

and again with:

on the top of wch in a fayre Oake satt a goulden
Eagle:²¹

The oak is a symbol for the Hastings family, as Henry Hastings was the keeper of the Royal Forest in Leicester. Notably in 1607, he also assumed the post of lord lieutenant of Leicestershire, another benchmark career advancement for the family. The eagle was a noted symbol for the Stanley family, a crest that the Countess of Huntingdon used throughout her life. Marston’s two references to an eagle atop an oak create a scene wherein the Hastings and Stanley lines “honor her [Alice] with their moste rayshed light.” The Earl and Countess of Huntingdon’s union reflected on Alice, as they had received the Stanley inheritance she had worked so hard to win for them.²²

To a minor extent, literary scholars have considered the occasion for which Marston wrote his entertainment. Arnold Davenport has suggested that the gathering was the setting to announce the engagement between Alice’s eldest daughter, Anne

20. Barry Coward, *The Stanleys, Lords Stanley, and Earls of Derby, 1385–1672: The Origins, Wealth, and Power of a Landowning Family* (Manchester, 1983); J. J. Bagley, *The Earls of Derby 1485–1985* (London, 1985); Vanessa Wilkie, “‘Such Daughters and Such a Mother’: The Countess of Derby and Her Three Daughters, 1560–1647” (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 2009), 196–235.

21. EL 34 B 9, lines 270–72, 299–300.

22. Conversation with James Knowles allowed for the parallel between Marston’s lines and the heraldry to become clear. See also *Fairbairn’s Book of Crests of the Families of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 1 (London, 1905), 147.

Stanley, and Grey Brydges, Lord Chandos.²³ As the 1607 Act of Parliament, however, includes language indicating that the couple were already married at the time of the settlement, this motivation for the gathering is unlikely.²⁴ Mary Erler briefly draws a parallel between the 1607 celebration in Leicester and the Act of Parliament, but she is primarily focused on the imagery in Marston's text. For Erler, the entertainment's significance is the articulation of Alice's strong matriarchal influence and the way in which her daughters perpetuated it.²⁵ Erler's reading is enhanced by rooting the text and the gathering-at-large more firmly in this specific moment in the lives of the Stanley women, particularly, and the Egerton-Hastings family more broadly. The 1607 Act of Parliament was a culmination of Alice's vocation as an elite mother.

Looking at only one masque in isolation, however, does not show that the Stanley women and their families consistently commissioned masques after pivotal moments in their lives. The family may have been clear about their motivations at the time, but as over four hundred years separate us from them, we can only recognize their long-term habits of patronage when we situate each event within a longer history. It is important to consider the imagery and significance of the text itself. But it is equally important to situate the event in the real-life context of the Egerton-Hastings family as they opted for grand spectacles, large gatherings, and familial celebrations. Following a long tradition of Stanley theatrical patronage, the Egerton-Hastings family congregated at Ashby in 1607 to celebrate their legal victory over the sixth Earl of Derby, spearheaded by Alice as the family matriarch, and thus created a bridge between Elizabethan theatrical performance and early Stuart masque entertainments.

Arcades: The 1631 Castlehaven Trials

In the early 1630s, the family gathered again, this time at Harefield Place, to watch Alice's grandchildren perform *Arcades*, an entertainment written by the young John Milton. Scholars have described the motivation for this gathering as "some special occasion," or one that was "hoping to cheer [Alice Egerton]," but no one questions that the entertainment was performed in Lady Alice's honor.²⁶ Cedric Brown argues that "the entertainment of which *Arcades* was a part might have been dedicated to her out of a sense of obligation and grateful recognition for the way in which she had served as centre to the family in a difficult time."²⁷ The difficult time that he

23. *The Poems of John Marston*, ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool, 1961), 42.

24. C 89/10/33, TNA.

25. Mary Erler, "Chaste Sports, Juste Prayses, & All Softe Delight': Harefield 1602 and Ashby 1607, Two Female Entertainments," in *The Elizabethan Theatre XIV*, ed. A. L. Magnusson and C. E. McGee (Toronto, 1996), 1–25.

26. Fogle, "Such a Rural Queen," 4; Rosemary Karmelich Mundhenk, "Dark Scandal and the Sun-Clad Power of Chastity: The Historical Milieu of Milton's *Comus*," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 15, no. 1 (1975): 143.

27. Brown, *John Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments*, 20.

refers to is the Castlehaven scandal in 1631. Anne, Alice's eldest daughter, accused her second husband, the Earl of Castlehaven, of assisting his footman in raping her. The earl and two of his servants were tried and executed for rape and sodomy.²⁸ Brown's observation takes on even more significance when situated against the notion that this was the second time that the Stanley family had gathered to celebrate a legal decision and the role that Alice had played in securing a victory for her family. They did not just commission the performance out of a sense of obligation and gratitude; they maintained their family's habit of demarking legal success with a large gathering and a masque as entertainment. While more than two decades had passed since the 1607 *Entertainment at Ashby*, the large gap in time can also be seen to indicate that the family commissioned these grand entertainments only after a truly momentous achievement. There were no large legal suits or major career advancements for the Egerton-Hastings family between 1607 and the 1631 Castlehaven trials.

The precise date of this entertainment is unknown, which has likely hindered our ability to overtly link the text with an event in the lives of the Egerton-Hastings family. Most scholars believe that the performance took place sometime between 1630 and 1634, but a close look at the chronology of the Egerton-Hastings family allows us to narrow the range.²⁹ The Earl of Castlehaven was tried and executed in April 1631, and his two servants implicated in the crimes were tried in June 1631 and executed in July 1631. Alice continued to petition the king to pardon her daughter and granddaughter for their involvement in the horrible affairs, which the king ultimately granted on November 30, 1631.³⁰ On the other end of the range, we know that the third and final family gathering, the one for the performance of *A Masque at Ludlow Castle (Comus)*, took place in September 1634 and that Milton also wrote this entertainment. It seems unlikely that the family would have commissioned, and that Milton would have written, two works in one year. The gathering at Harefield Place for the performance of *Arcades* was most likely in 1632 or 1633—that is, after the king had granted the pardons but before the Bridgewater family moved to Ludlow.

In *Arcades*, Milton emphasizes the powerful influence that Alice exerted:

Mark what radiant state she spreads,
In circle round her shining throne
Shooting her beams like silver threads:
This, this is she alone,

28. For the complete history of the Castlehaven trials, see Cynthia Herrup, *A House in Gross Disorder: Sex Law, and the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven* (Oxford, 1999); and Wilkie, "Such a Mother," 236–86.

29. The list of articles that offer dates is extensive. The most recognized sources are Butler, *The Stuart Court Masque*, 358–76; and Cedric Brown, "Milton's 'Arcades' in the Trinity Manuscript," *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 37, no. 148 (November 1986): 542–49.

30. "Pardons for the Dowager Countess of Castlehaven and Lady Audley," November 1631, SP 16/203, fol. 53, TNA.

Sitting like a goddess bright
In the centre of her light.³¹

The scene takes on an even more personal meaning when we envision Alice's grandchildren reciting the lines to her in the presence of their larger kinship network. Alice had deployed every familial connection she had to get her daughter and granddaughter successfully out of the tribulations of the Castlehaven trials. In one of her petitions to King Charles and other influential politicians during and after the trials, she expressed her desire that "neither my Daughter nor [Lady Audley] will ever offend either God or his Majesty againe by their wicked Courses, But redeeme what is past, by their reformation and newnesse of life."³² Just as Marston's masque twenty-five years earlier had marked Alice's ambition and legal prowess, Milton drew on the same themes in *Arcades*. The inheritance suit against William Stanley and the Castlehaven trials were highly complicated and trying crusades in which the Stanley women and their families ultimately received vindication. Both legal victories were moments of career success for Alice, leading to the advancement of her family.

Arcades was not only the second time that the family used a masque entertainment to mark a legal triumph and honor Alice but also the second time that the tiny village of Harefield served as the stage for a grand entertainment. The first was when Alice and her second husband, Thomas Egerton, hosted Queen Elizabeth on her last summer progress in 1602. Mary Erler compares the *Entertainment at Ashby* to the production of Queen Elizabeth's Harefield entertainment to conclude that "The similarity of the amusements at Harefield and Ashby suggests some factor which stands outside of the male invention, a factor which might be labeled female choice."³³ As the *Entertainment at Ashby* was held in honor of Lady Alice, she probably liked the idea of following in Queen Elizabeth's footsteps. Harefield had been the site of a monarchical entertainment; now it was to be the site of a matriarchal entertainment.

The language in Milton's masque indicates that he and his audiences were aware of this relationship between monarchy and matriarchy. Milton plays with the notion that Alice reigned in Harefield:

I will bring you where she sits,
Clad in splendor as befits
Her deity.
Such a rural Queen
All Arcadia hath not seen.³⁴

31. John Milton, *Arcades: With Introduction, Notes, and Indexes*, ed. A. W. Verity (Cambridge, 1908), 3, lines 15–19.

32. "Alice Egerton to Secretary Dorchester," [April 1631], SP 16/189, fol. 140, TNA.

33. Erler, "Chaste Sports," 21.

34. *Arcades*, 6, lines 91–95.

If Alice was the “rural Queen,” then Harefield was her kingdom. In a study of early modern provincial drama, Paul White claims that the provincial masque “remains a somewhat sketchy but potentially important field for future research.”³⁵ Perhaps these masques only seem “sketchy” because they cannot be reconciled with national politics, a wedding, or traditional festivals. When we situate these performances in the specific lives of the hosts and hostesses, the reason for the occasion starts to make more sense, as does the locality of their staging. Nicholas Cooper has argued that rural estate entertainments were more “concerned with community” than those hosted by elites in London.³⁶ In 1607, Marston used the forest in Leicestershire as his backdrop, and in the early 1630s, Milton turned Harefield into Arcadia. While these performances are set in two localities away from London, they are more about the influence and success of this dynastic elite family than the communities themselves.

A Masque at Ludlow Castle: The 1634 Installation as President of the Marches of Wales

While both the *Entertainment at Ashby* and *Arcades* mark significant moments in the lives of the Egerton-Hastings family, they are overshadowed in a literary sense by a third masque that the family commissioned in 1634: Milton’s *A Masque at Ludlow Castle*, which is now commonly known as *Comus*. *Comus* is not only the best known of the masques commissioned by the family but also one of the most celebrated and debated literary pieces of the seventeenth century. The reception of this work has obscured our ability and willingness to contextualize it within the lives of the people who commissioned and performed it. William Hunter Jr. has criticized twentieth-century literary scholars for putting Milton at the center of this performance, arguing that “the writer of a masque had to do exactly as he was told, for any significant deviations that were not welcome would, of course, have been recognized and changed or deleted by the participants in the rehearsals.”³⁷ The masque might have come from Milton, but the directives came from John Egerton, Earl of Bridgewater, and “others of [his] noble familie,” who commissioned it.³⁸

Bridgewater acquired Ludlow as his seat when he assumed the position of president of the Marches of Wales. Charles I appointed Bridgewater on July 8, 1631, just two days after the execution of the two servants found guilty in the Castlehaven trials.³⁹ In the aftermath of the scandals, the Earl of Bridgewater waited three years

35. Paul Whitfield White, *Drama and Religion in English Provincial Society, 1485–1660* (Cambridge, 2008), 6.

36. Nicholas Cooper, “Rank, Manners and Display: The Gentlemanly House, 1500–1750,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 12 (2002): 300.

37. William Hunter Jr., *Milton’s “Comus”: Family Piece* (Troy, N.Y., 1983), 4.

38. Dedicatory epistle by Henry Lawes, *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* (London, 1637), sig. A2r.

39. “Appointment of John Egerton to the post of president of the Marches of Wales,” July 8, 1631, SP 16/196, fol. 25, TNA.

to officially take office. Bridgewater was married to Frances Stanley, who was daughter of Ferdinando and Alice, one of the Stanley coheiresses, and sister to the Countess of Castlehaven. The family tree is even more complicated because Bridgewater's father, Thomas Egerton, was the second husband to Alice, Dowager Countess of Derby. The Earl and Countess of Bridgewater were not just husband and wife but also stepsiblings. Three of their children—aptly named Alice, Thomas, and John—played the main parts in Milton's masque, and the children's music teacher, Henry Lawes, performed as well. Just as the *Entertainment at Ashby* and *Arcades* marked quintessential moments in the lives of the Egerton-Hastings family that reaffirmed status and stability, this third and final gathering should be viewed as the culmination of the family's rise. The fact that the children and their music tutor performed most of the parts suggests that the patrons also intended this performance to put family at the center. Egerton's rise was not his alone; the entire extended Egerton-Hastings family benefited from his new position.

Milton references Egerton's appointment and esteemed political stature to frame the opening scene:

A noble Peere of mickle trust, and power
Has in his charge, with temper'd awe to guide
An old, and haughtie Nation proud in Armes:
Where his faire off-spring nurs't in Princely lore
Are comming to attend their Fathers state,
And new-entrusted Scepter, but their way
Lies through the perplex't pathes of this dreare wood⁴⁰

The action opens with young Alice and her two brothers going for a walk in Ludlow forest. Alice is separated from her brothers and meets Comus, a demon who brings her back to his lair. Comus then tries to seduce her and steal her virtue. She ardently resists and defends herself against him. Guided by a good attendant spirit, her brothers find her just in time, and the three escape, unscathed, and return safely home.

Barbara Breasted agrees with other literary scholars and historians that the family gathered at Ludlow Castle in 1634 to celebrate the earl's accession as president of the Marches of Wales. She offers a very different reading of the masque, though, arguing that the Castlehaven affair three years earlier "provided a context for *Comus* that may have influenced the way the masque was written, the way it was cut for its first performance, and the way it was received by its first audience."⁴¹ Breasted's work has given rise to an entire debate on the link between *Comus* and the scandal.⁴²

40. *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle*, 2, lines 31–37.

41. Barbara Breasted, "Comus and the Castlehaven Scandal," *Milton Studies* 3 (1971): 202.

42. See John Creaser, "Milton's *Comus*: The Irrelevance of the Castlehaven Scandal," *Milton Quarterly* 21 (1987): 24–34; Leah Marcus, "Justice for Margery Evans: A 'Local' Reading

While literary aspects of the text itself might support these readings, these pursuits completely divorce the performance of the text from the lives of the patrons and performers.

Such studies overlook the long-term patronage tradition of the Egerton-Hastings family. If Milton wrote *Arcades* as the entertainment for the family gathering at the end of the Castlehaven trials, then *Comus* would have served a different purpose. *Comus* does center on themes of virtue and the ability to resist seduction, themes that are mirrored in the Castlehaven trials. But, because the family had already gathered and commissioned *Arcades*, the performance of *Comus* was motivated by another event. The Earl of Bridgewater's career advancement serves as the most reasonable motivation. To suggest that the Egerton-Hastings family used Bridgewater's installation as a moment to relive the themes of the Castlehaven affair is to misjudge the characters of these family members and to ignore the ways in which the family utilized masques in their own spaces. The literary themes might suggest this, but the historical context indicates otherwise.

Conclusion

Lady Alice learned the art of patronage from her first husband, Ferdinando Stanley, during the fourteen years the couple spent in Lancashire, but the entertainments discussed here mark a new era for the Egerton-Hastings family, as they deployed a more contemporary performance genre than their Stanley ancestors. Consideration of these masques as a trio, rather than as a series of individual events or only as context for Milton's masques, reveals that the Egerton-Hastings family strategically used entertainments to mark legal victories and political appointments. The first two entertainments center on matriarchal legal prowess and family stability, while the third speaks to the family's political rise. Recognizing the long-term patronage habits of the Egerton-Hastings family points to the many ways in which other early modern elite families used masques to celebrate their dynastic grandeur. It also permits us to more accurately pinpoint these performances in time. While the masques and magnificent gatherings were important components to constructing a commanding reputation, these celebrations were also vitally personal moments for the Egerton-Hastings family. In many ways, these entertainments defined the legacies of the individual participants.

These legacies, however, were somewhat obscured in the proceeding centuries, as the texts and the authors, especially in the case of Milton, began to outshine their original contexts. The first of these three entertainments to be printed was *A Maske*

of *Comus*," in *Milton and the Idea of Woman*, ed. Julia Walker (Urbana, Ill., 1988), 66–85; Nancy Weitz Miller, "Chastity, Rape, and Ideology in the Castlehaven Testimonies and Milton's Ludlow Mask," *Milton Studies* 32 (1995): 153–68; and Michael Wilding, "Milton's 'A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634': Theater and Politics on the Border," *Milton Quarterly* 21 (1987): 35–51.

Presented at Ludlow Castle, which was printed in 1637, just three years after the performance. The volume does not include mention of Milton as the author. Henry Lawes wrote the dedicatory epistle to John, Viscount Brackley, “Son and heire apparent to the Earle of Bridgewater.”⁴³ This masque was reprinted and reissued routinely in the subsequent decades and centuries. Arguably, its early and wide circulation in print enhanced its accessibility and notoriety. The two other masques performed at the Egerton-Hastings gatherings are bibliographically far more obscure. *Arcades* was not published until 1727, when it was included in a volume titled *Paradise Regain’d*, which included an anthology of other Miltonic writings. (The volume, of course, also includes *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle*.)⁴⁴ *The Entertainment at Ashby* was not printed in its entirety until the twentieth century, although extracts based on the Bridgewater presentation manuscript were first printed in 1801.⁴⁵

This disproportionate circulation in print and Milton’s acclaim later in his life have led to an anachronistic reading of these entertainments, divorcing these texts from their original contexts and leaving Marston’s work and the influence and experience of the patrons out of the broader picture. When we resituate these masques within their original context, centuries of Milton’s celebrity and extensive bibliography fade away, and we see these performances and gatherings in a clearer light. This, in turn, allows us to more accurately understand the literary genre of masque entertainments and the motivations of the early modern elites who commissioned and hosted them.

The author wishes to thank Tawny Paul for reading an early draft of this essay, the audiences at the Renaissance Conference of Southern California, the conference at Knowsley Hall arranged by Stephen Lloyd and Elspeth Graham, and the editors and peer reviewers for their valuable and constructive comments.

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43. Lawes, dedication to *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle*, sig. A2r.

44. John Milton, *Paradise Regain’d: A Poem. In Four Books. To which is added Samson Agonistes; and Poems upon several Occasions*, 7th ed. (London, 1727).

45. *The Poems of John Marston*, ed. Davenport, 41.