

**The Masters of the Revels and Elizabeth I's Court Theatre  
[Book Review]**

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*The Masters of the Revels and Elizabeth I's Court Theatre.* By W. R. STREITBERGER.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2016. xv+319 pp. £54. ISBN 978-0-19-871967-0.

W. R. Streitberger's comprehensive and scholarly account of Elizabeth's Masters of the Revels is organised by Master: Sir Thomas Cawarden, Sir Thomas Benger, Edmund Tilney (who gets two chapters), and a chapter called 'The Interregnum, 1572-78' on the period between Benger and Tilney. It opens with a substantial introduction which starts, inevitably, with Chambers, but offers a thoroughgoing revision of many of his key conclusions. This gives a very detailed and scholarly survey (marred only by the misspelling of Annabel Patterson's name as Anabelle) of what Chambers said and who has since agreed or disagreed with him and in what ways. I can imagine this being handy, but it is not lively, and does not really tell readers anything they could not discover for themselves. The book perks up when it moves on to describing what revels actually were, especially when it considers things that never actually happened, such as the three consecutive nights of entertainments which would have occurred had Elizabeth met Mary, Queen of Scots at Nottingham Castle in 1562; an elephant ridden by Friendship would have drawn in a chariot, and the whole would have concluded with a song 'as full of Armony, as may be devised'. If there was one relationship which could have done with a bit of Armony, it was surely that between Mary and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth's first Master, Sir Thomas Cawarden, is not often remembered, but he was one of the men on whom she depended to see that her accession to the throne passed off without incident. He had overseen masques for Henry VIII and provided entertainments for the triple wedding of Lady Jane Grey, her sister and her sister-in-law, and he was also granted Blackfriars, marking its first association with theatre. He oversaw the revels for Elizabeth's first Christmas as queen and for her coronation; he gave them a stridently anti-Catholic

flavour, but otherwise there was considerable continuity with the entertainments produced for her father Henry VIII. He died the year after Elizabeth's accession, perhaps from complications after an accident in which he broke both his legs, and was succeeded by Sir Thomas Benger, who held the office for thirteen years and under whom the Revels office moved to Clerkenwell, to the former priory of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem. His emphasis was more classical than his predecessor's, but his judgement was not always sound: he found himself in the Tower for a Shrovetide entertainment in which a lady of allegedly easy virtue ended up dancing with the queen. He also spent more than the queen was willing to countenance, and though he seems to have died in 1572 his replacement, Edmund Tilney, was not appointed until 1578; in the interim the Earl of Sussex and his deputy Thomas Blagrave mounted occasional entertainments, and though the council gave thought to the whole nature of the role of Master of the Revels they were rather overtaken by events, because the centre of power of London's dramatic energies moved decisively with the opening of the Theatre in 1578. When Edmund Tilney took up the post, also in 1578, it had changed from being one of mounting entertainments to one of sourcing them, and we have entered onto territory more familiar to many scholars.

Streitberger has little to say that is revelatory; the one thing that really surprises is what is *not* there, in that so little of the early Masters' energies went on censorship. However all the chapters are packed with detail, the earlier material in particular is likely to be fresh to many readers, and this will make a very useful reference book.

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