



# ‘Strange Habits’ Clothes, Climes, and the Environment in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries

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## **Discoloured Taffeta and Variable Colours: Materialising Iris’ Rainbow Stage Costume in Jacobean Drama**

Discoloured taffeta and variable colours – these are but a few indications given in Francis Beaumont’s *The Masque of the Inner Temple*, staged in February 1613, to recapture the colours and materials that were used to design the stage costume worn by the masker impersonating Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, in this Jacobean court masque. This mythological character, appearing two years before in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611), was depicted as the “many-coloured messenger” (4.1.76) who came along with Juno and her colourful peacocks. Starting with these two examples representing a rainbow on stage, this paper aims at studying how this ephemeral climatic phenomenon could be materialised with stage costumes used in Jacobean court masques and drama in a pre-Newtonian world. Prior to Isaac Newton’s scientific revolution, which still shapes our perception of colours today, rainbows could be paradoxically depicted either as a transparent arch, as in the well-known *Rainbow Portrait* of Queen Elizabeth (1600) or as multi-coloured circles, as can be seen, for example, in medieval illuminated manuscripts. Despite the existence of two sketches representing the character of Iris, as featured in a 1613 pageant staged for Princess Elizabeth at Heidelberg and in Ben Jonson’s masque *Chloridia* (1631), the colours and the material used for the stage costumes shown in different Elizabethan and Jacobean entertainments and plays have raised controversy among critics. By taking into account the mythological, biblical and literary representations of this climatic element, this paper will rely on the material history of pigments, dyes and textile in early modern England to investigate the techniques that could have been used to design both the transparency and the polychromy of the rainbow on Iris’ stage costume which symbolises an ephemeral, immaterial natural phenomenon.