

## **“Mute Hieroglyphics”: Representing Femininity in the Early Stuart Court Masques**

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by Anikó Oroszlán<sup>1</sup>

While in the history of the *commedia dell'arte*, actresses seem to occupy a central position, there is not much said and written about early English actresses in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Histories of early modern English theatre focus on male performance, however, as Stephen Orgel emphasises, theatre was a place of unusual freedom for women as well (Orgel 1996, 10). It is a well-accepted fact that large female audiences have a great impact on the development of Renaissance drama, and also, female behaviour and emotions (or, with the contemporary term, passions) were often thematised in plays. Orgel also stresses that even if Elizabethan theatre excluded women, they could take part in various forms of public performances such as civic pageants and guild plays (Orgel 1996, 11). At the same time, the travelling troupes from Italy visited not only London but also the countryside, so English spectators, every now and then, could see professional actresses on public stages.

Seeing women performing as well as beholding foreign companies could have meant the experience of otherness for the English audiences. Orgel mentions that this is parallel to the alien contexts in plays such as the French and Italian setting in comedies and pastorals or the Spanish or Scandinavian bearings in tragedies

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter and a less thorough discussion of this topic was published under the title “‘Actors’ in ‘Barbaresque Mantells’: The Blackness of the Female Performers in Ben Jonson's Masque of Blackness” *The AnaChronist* 11 (2005): 23-37.

(Orgel 1996, 12). So facing the Other in early modern theatre has several concerns, a segment of which I would like to discuss in this essay. On the one hand, women who performed were considered to be corrupt and amoral, and interestingly enough, the characteristic features attributed to them were very similar to those that described theatre as a devilish place. On the other hand, female presence on stages was saturated with the politics and the ideology of the age, especially because noble ladies as well as the reigning queen – being in an exceptional position – were able to find the occasion to show themselves in public, even like “actresses.” In this essay, at first, my intention is to show those prejudices against early modern theatre that one can relate to female performers of the age. Then I aim to have a closer look at the only genre where women could present themselves in a legitimate way: the Jacobean court masque. I will argue that even if London court theatre was a secure ground to make theatre with women, for instance, imagery suggests that these performances represented male dominancy and the same biased attitude against acting that we can detect on public stages.

The question of the first women on the early English stage is one of the numerous mysteries in theatre history. It seems that there is no real consensus whether the first English female performers could be regarded as the first English actresses or not. Sandra Richards in her book, *The Rise of the English Actress* (1993), starts discussing her topic with the Restoration era, and as for the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, she only deals with examples of non-professional women players and entertainers appearing on public stages or in marketplace shows (Richards 1993, 1-5). She does not mention court plays, however; performances at the royal court and popular drama could have mutually influenced each other. Scripts were written by playwrights who worked for public stages as well, and what is more, professional actors were often engaged to participate in court spectacles. Thus, as female performers of masques got

involved in popular playmaking to some extent, they could have gathered real theatrical interests, and it is possible to examine them in relation to public performances. Also, in the former Elizabethan era, exhibiting Queen Elizabeth's body as a significant part of royal spectacles could have influenced the way female stage presence was considered.

The Jacobean court masque, as Graham Parry explains, was primarily a political construct, and it focused on the emblematic celebration of the monarchy (Parry 1981, 89). The most distinguished spectator of the masque was the King, who did not only have the seat from which he could have the best view of the stage, but at the same time, he was also in the middle of the noble audience's attention (Orgel 1975, 14). In this respect, even if the King did not play in the actual production, he was a performer and a viewer at the same time. Boundaries between stage and auditorium were erased, and the King presented himself as an essential component of the spectacle. The auditorium and the arrangement of the seats were just as well-organised as the production itself, and the whole event was composed to be a living emblem of the monarch's eternal grace (Kogan 1986, 30). In its function, thus, the court masque was similar to the royal processions and entries which showed Queen Elizabeth's body as a sight, and where she – adjusting to the social expectations that she created by herself – could have intentionally presented her royalty as a role. Stephen Greenblatt describes this phenomenon with the term self-fashioning, which is a set of constantly repeated, ideology-dependent behavioural patterns by which the individual displays himself (Greenblatt 1980, 1-9). This was a social practice that permeated early modern English culture, not only in the private (court) spheres, but also on public stages, and the metadramatic scenes in early modern plays often reflect on these manners. Later – as excellent occasions for self-fashioning – the masques in James' court gave royals the opportunity to take up roles and show themselves. Although James I never played in masques, in *The Masque of Blackness* (1605) by Ben

Jonson, for instance, he was lifted to a superhuman level, which was referred to in the plot as well as by his elevated royal seat in the centre of the space. His role – just like in all the other masques – was to overwrite the rules of nature and to make beauty out of blackness, thus solving the conflict of the play. So the aim of the performance was to stage constant and stable (male) political power.

The court masque, contrary to its explicit theatricality, is not expressly regarded as a theatrical performance in early modern literary studies. Theorists such as Stephen Orgel (1965, 1975) and Graham Parry (1981) rather interpret it as a fine art composition without real theatrical or performative value. Still, masques are worth considering from a theatre historical perspective, since – as I have mentioned before – in the strictly male-dominated theatrical space of early modern England, the court was a special territory where women could display themselves. In this way, the masque is peculiarly involved in the issue of otherness, and the main function of these private performances could have been to show the Other, which is the female performer. When approaching the masque from a theatrical perspective, one perceives uncertainty in terms of defining the genre for its mutability as opposed to permanence. As the texts indicate, authors applied Greek and Roman mythology, well-known Renaissance symbolism, and emblem books as well as the English folklore, and the concept was created in a way that the production relied on the audience's background knowledge and classical court education. The elaborate scenes and the series of Platonic allegories represented the perfect equilibrium of world harmony, and the function of symbolic scenic effects, stage designs, and the choreography were created in order to strengthen this picture. Even if staging was always carefully designed by the writers of masques, obviously, the actual performance was once-living and ephemeral by nature. So transmutation and change in the masque were not only indicated by the political content (for instance, in *The Masque of Blackness*, the King's power to change corruptness into beauty), but also by the very fact that it

took the form of performance, and the characters were played partly by courtmen, partly by professional players. At the same time, although the mythological and allegorical setting emphasised the immortality of the royals, by employing players on the stage, individuals inevitably became the image of the corrupt human being/the fallen man disapproved by anti-theatricalists.

The opposition of the rigid form and the spectacular stage realisation brings forward the differentiation between the masque-as-literature and the masque-as-performance, or, in more general terms, the separation of drama understood as a text or as the possibility of performance. In masque criticism, as Stephen Kogan summarises, there is a shift in the 1970s, when monographies on the genre by Roy Strong and Stephen Orgel started to eliminate the former bias against Inigo Jones and the – much more theatrical – Caroline masque. He also points out that although the consideration of the genre as a spectacle is essential, “without the masque as literature, there would be no permanent dramatic form and no coherent record of the politics and philosophy beneath the outward show” (Kogan 1986, 31).<sup>2</sup> This argument might be edifying considering recent contemporary debates on the superiority of drama and/or performance in theatre and drama studies, where performance often seems to be secondary, the Other. Although the court masque does not have a legitimate position in theatre history, I believe that by neglecting to interpret the performance side of it, we would lose much of the genre’s meaning.

Although before 1660-62, there were no actresses in English public theatres, spectators, anti-theatrical writers, and dramatists had remarks on foreign female performers, and especially puritan pamphlets attacked those “hog-faced women” from Italy and France who participated in plays and entertainments (Thomson 1996, 104). Even if the admirers of the English theatre (actors and dramatists, such as Thomas Heywood) spoke in admiration about Italian and

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<sup>2</sup> For the overview on masque criticism up to the 1970s, see Kogan 1986, 27-31.

French travelling troupes – including women – whom they could have seen in England, puritans did not only associate actresses with whores and women of easy moral, but also with the devil (Barish 1981, 92). This was based on the general anti-theatricalist assumption that via theatre, a person can change into someone else. Self-transformation of actors was associated with deceit and counterfeiting, and since theatre targets the senses (especially the eye), performance has an effect on the spectator's sensibility, which also means that, from the transcendent spirit, their attention is directed to the flesh-and-bone body. Theatre, through the display of physicality, represents mutability and changeability, which are the characteristics of Satan's operation in the world. To analyse this context further, we might say that acting/bodily presence is the synonym of the corruption of God's established order and the true Christian's sincere behaviour. As William Prynne writes in his *Histriomastix* (1632),

For God, who is true in selfe, in whom there is no variableness, no shadow of change no feining, no hypocrisie; as he hath given a uniforme distinct and proper being to every creature, the bounds of which may not be exceeded: so he requires that the actions of every creature should be honest and sincere, devoyde of all hypocrisie, as all his actions and their natures are (quoted in Barish 1981, 92).

So on the one hand, the body was associated with the instability of meanings. However, in the Christian interpreting framework, another aspect (or consequence) of physicality was lust, effeminacy and lewdness. Laura Levine in her article "Men in Women's Clothing" analyses the effeminising power of theatre and proves that as for the Puritan idea of the seemingly coherent identity, there are many contradictions concerning the understanding of the self. Attackers, for instance, describe the self as being stable and God-given, nevertheless, they constantly give utterance to their fear that it is transforming under the influence of stage plays (Levine 1986, 121). Both actors and spectators are warned that if they visit plays, they will turn into beasts and monsters; what is more, male actors who

wear female clothing will literally metamorphose into a woman. As Prynne explains the issue,

May we not see our players metamorphosed into women on the stage, not only by putting on the female robes, but likewise the effeminate gestures, speeches, pace, behaviour, attire, delicacy, passions, manners, arts and wiles of the female sex, yea, of the most petulant, unchaste, insinuating strumpets that either Italy or the world affords? What wantonness, what effeminacy parallel to that which our men-women actors, in all their feminine (yea, sometime in their masculine parts) express upon the theater? (quoted in Pollard 2004, 290).

Identifying the transforming female body as the largest threat may have some other references. Stephen Orgel – mentioning *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* by Sir Thomas Browne (1646) – alludes to the early modern idea of the convertibility of sexes. According to this, men can turn (back) into women and thus, they will lose male potential. In this concept of early medical history, every individual starts as a woman, which is confirmed by the habits of dressing all children in skirts in their early years. Boys were only given pants when they were removed from the care of women and began to be educated as men (Orgel 1996, 25).

Another consequence of observing women on stage was the possible erotic pleasure of the spectator. One can find many examples in plays, where bawdy jokes and ribaldry were connected to performance, especially as far as city comedies are concerned. The sexuality involved in acting could definitely add to the interpretations of the physical aspects of early modern acting. One of the best-known dramatic examples is Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606), where the main character, when seducing Celia, a married lady, applies certain performative tricks. He disguises himself as Scoto of Mantua in order to fulfil his aims. Since the scene of in the play is the corrupt Venice, which provides field for the manipulative actions of Volpone and his company, the play does not only represent Ben Jonson's aversion to performance, but also the critique of Italian manners.

It is a fact that in early modern Italy, from the 1560s, actresses were popular and recognised. At the same time, early commedia actresses were associated with courtesans of the type *oneste meretrici*, who were educated singers, musicians and poets. Kathleen McGill argues that although there is no direct evidence between courtesans and actresses, they were connected in the collective (male) fantasy (McGill 1991, 63). This is something we can also detect in the treatises of English anti-theatricalists. For this reason, in Italy, the institution of theatre was demonised by the attackers due to the presence of female bodies. Especially because early modern women had restricted access to the public sphere, there was a fear they undermine the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church (Kerr 2008, 186).

Nonetheless, Isabella Andreini, one of the best-known commedia actresses and writers of her age, was famous for her improvisational and rhetorical talent, and this is quite remarkable in light of the fact that early modern English and Italian theatres are often contrasted in terms of accuracy in the reproduction of the text. Extempore acting is primarily considered to be a crucial part in the commedia dell'arte players' personal scenario. It was assumed that Italian actors used brief plots and sketches to develop the performance, and improvisation was rather a kind of composition which actors created from classical literary works, everyday speech, and commonplace books. In his intriguing study, Robert Henke compares orality and literacy in in early modern English and Italian theatres, and his main concern is that both traditions were competitive grounds for the two modalities. However, improvisation had different meanings in the traditionally script-based English theatre and on the rather improvisational Italian stage (Henke 1996, 27-28). Although I refrain from such a positivist binary opposition of these two theatres concerning orality and literacy, I have to add that for English actors, extemporisation principally meant disconnection from literary theatre, and improvisational acting included the composition of spontaneous rhymes, endings



of speeches, exits, punning on others' words or the mocking repetition of what has been heard. Nevertheless, in text-centred theatre, improvisation can definitely be defined as rebellious behaviour, which was especially associated with the fool or the clown character. Comic actors in the English theatre occupied a similar position to (Italian) actresses in the sense that they represented oddity and extravagancy.

The context which connects female performers to improvisation and unpredictability can be readily connected to the strategies of the English court masque. Ben Jonson, the most successful author of masques might be regarded as an anti-theatricalist in the sense that he treated players and spectacle with bias, and although he wrote for the theatre his whole life, he felt that the mutability of performance – both public and private – threatened his poetic universe (Barish 1981, 133-140). His deep suspicion towards theatricality can be detected both in his plays and masques as well as his theoretical works. He was convinced, for instance, that playgoers visited theatre in order to parade their fine clothes so as to make spectacles themselves and to compete with the play. As for the stagecraft, he was to a great extent against “painting and carpentry” (Barish 1981, 133). In his *Timber; or Discoveries*, for instance, he announced one of the most typical fears of puritan attackers of theatre, namely that the player is not able to rule the role he plays.

Every man, forgetfull of himselfe, is in travaile with expression of another. Nay, wee too insist in imitating others, as wee cannot (when it is necessary) returne to ourselves: like Children, that imitate the vices of Stammerers so long, till at last they become such (Jonson [1640] 1947, 597).

Performance, thus, lacks the control of the individual in terms of his behaviour, so those involved in theatrical activity are characterised with untrue nature and fake identity. Although Jonson's plays were performed on stage, he tended to think of them as literary entities and reading experience rather than theatre. Because of

this, he never misses the opportunity to separate the written form and the acted one. On the 1600 title page of *Every Man Out of his Humor*, he informs the readers that the play was “first composed by the author” and contains “more then hath been publickely spoken or acte[d]” (quoted in Barish 1981, 136). As Richard Dutton claims, Jonson’s career exemplifies what Michael Foucault called the emergence of the notion of the actor (Dutton 1996, 3). He refers to Jonson as a conscious literary agent, who – especially in his epistles to his plays and masques – emphasises the importance of his own superiority and controlling power (Dutton 1996, 21-32), which, when it was opposed to theatre-makers, lead to anti-theatrical judgements.

Jonson found the actor’s voice and the public’s ear unreliable and untrustworthy elements over which he had too little control. This prejudice against the mutable and momentary nature of the performance is perhaps the most significant aspect of Jonson’s anti-theatricality, and this ambiguous attitude towards theatre is traceable in his court masques as well. With the publishing of the masques, Jonson’s aim was to fix performances in a literary form, that is to “redeem them as well from Ignorance and Envy, two common evils, the one of censure, the other of oblivion”, as he informs the reader in the introduction to *The Masque of Blackness* (Jonson [1605] 1890, 35). Nevertheless, here, at the beginning of his career as a writer of masques, he seemed to accept that this genre – or perhaps performance in general – is the result of artistic co-operation, and he admitted that “the honour and splendour of these spectacles was such in the performance” (Jonson [1605] 1890, 35). However, his later debate with Inigo Jones demonstrates that Jonson could never really reconcile himself to the fact that besides poetry, spectacle and acting are equally integral parts of the performance.

For Jonson, the poet-playwright, the masque was fundamentally about the verse, character, and dialogue, while for Inigo Jones – the designer and architect

who was responsible for the performance – it was about space, scenery, and spectacle. Although Jonson understood masque as literature, in fact, he could not deny that as a theatrical genre, it originated in various stage entertainments. If one considers masque as performance, it becomes clear that, on the one hand, it is changeable, unstable, and mutable by nature, on the other hand, the living experience of it cannot be repeated, reproduced and documented. Still, what Jonson always intends to achieve by the publishing of the masques – especially as far as the long descriptive passages of stage actions and directions are concerned – is to rule the “physical” part of the masque so as to make it lasting; or so as to make poetry superior to performance. Also, this was his way of arguing with Jones, who was not really a man of words. Unfortunately, we know the debate mostly from the Jonsonian side. Jones was primarily a painter and an architect, and he never even wrote a treatise. The only publication associated with his name was the *Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain, Vulgarly Called Stone-Heng on Salisbury Plain* (1655), which was supposedly put together by his student, John Webb after Jones’ death. Since then, the authorship has been debated.<sup>3</sup>

The tension between text and spectacle is made very clear with the distinction between the “body” and the “soul” of the masque described by Jonson in the introduction to *The Masque of Hymen* (1606):

It is a noble and just advantage that the things subjected to understanding have of those which are objected to sense that the one sort are but momentary and merely taking, the other impressing and lasting. Else the glory of all these solemnities had perished like a blaze and gone out in the beholders’s eyes. So short lived are the bodies of all things on comparison of their souls. And, though bodies oftentimes have the ill luck to be sensually preferred, they find afterwards the food fortune when souls live, to be utterly forgotten (Jonson [1606] 1890, 58).

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<sup>3</sup> For more details, see Handa 2006, 357-378 and Peacock 1995. For details of the debate of Jones and Jonson, see Parry 1981, 176-180.

Here, the “bodily part”, which is a metaphor of spectacle, theatre, or performance, is described as “short living” and “sensually preferred”, while the “soul” of the masque, which is poetry, is lasting and “subjected to understanding”. Thus, the body – let that be a reference to spectacle, picture, or physical presence – in (private) theatre is, paradoxically, something that Jonson fights against. As Peacock explains, he might argue with the support of Protestant iconoclasm behind him and assumes that the crucial and trustworthy form of representation is language (Peacock 1995, 38). This is the same logic that Puritans used against theatre, with which they primarily focused on the dangerous nature of sight. As Jonson himself puts in in his *Timber; or Discoveries*:

*Poetry, and Picture, are Arts of a like nature; and both are busie about imitation. It was excellently said of Plutarch, Poetry was a speaking Picture, and Picture a mute Poesie. For they both invent, faine, and devise many things, and accommodate all they invent to the use, and service of nature. Yet of the two, the Pen is more noble than the Pencill. For that can speake to the Understanding; the other, but to the Sense (Jonson [1640] 1947, 609-10).*

Additionally, poetry is the art of the soul, while picture is only of the body. Thus, the latter generally acquires negative connotation in the masques, and it is not only a metaphor of theatre and performance, but also, I would say, of Inigo Jones. In *The Masque of Blackness*, it says “[s]o much for the bodily part, which was of Master Inigo Jones his design and act” (Jonson [1605] 1890, 37).

This clear-cut distinction between the “body” and the “soul” of the masque is, however, paradoxical, if one takes a closer look. Although spectacle is held to be evanescent by Jonson, on stage, from a theatrical perspective, it is always there to stress what the performance has to tell the audience, it engraves the message in their mind. Counting on the spectators’ visual memory, the aim of every performance is to provide them with a lasting, memorable experience, and if one recalls the warnings of anti-theatricalists, this was a real danger to the audience’s morals. In other words, although poets like Jonson might have protected against

the metaphoric power of theatre, at the same time, as theatre-makers, they had to admit that spectacle was intended to function as the preservation of the experience or the lasting effect created in the spectator.

Also, this polemic has many linkages to the notion of otherness. As I mentioned before, mutability, instability as well as improvisation were female characteristic features according to Puritans. The “bodily part”, that is the unreliable performative side of the masque, therefore, can be related to women (female masques, actresses, court ladies, even the Queen): it is tempting, impressive, but illusory and deceitful. If one is attracted by the spectacle of the masque, the attention is distracted from the understanding of true poetry, which is the creation of the (male) poet. Consequently, performance becomes the symbol of female attitudes, such as allurements and seduction. Otherness, nevertheless, is also represented in another concern of the Jonson-Jones debate. Jonson, in a mocking way, frequently associates Jones (and also theatre) with a foreign land, Italy. In one of his epigrams, *On The Townes Hones Man*, Jonson calls Jones “th’Italian” who makes his way in the world by miming.

At every meale, where it doth dine, or sup,  
The cloth’s no sooner gone, but it gets up  
And, shifting of it’s faces, doth play more  
Parts, than th’Italian could do, with his dore.  
Acts old Iniquitie, and in the fit  
Of miming, gets th’ opinion of a wit (quoted in Barish 1981, 145).

Beside that this refers to the fact that Jones learned everything about theatre in Italy, what Jonson’s biased attitude recalls again is anti-theatrical writers on Italian theatre makers. Italy as another foreign land appears as a corrupt place, where people are infected with viciousness. This maintains the same distinction that Puritan pamphlets on Italian manners also stressed: the strict separation of “us” (English) and “them” (other countries, especially from the deteriorated southern region of Europe).

This supposition is clearly manifested in Jonson's court plays such as *The Masque of Blackness* (1605) and *The Masque of Beauty* (1608). The original idea was probably to stage to metamorphoses from blackness to beauty, however, there is quite a long interval in time between the two masques. As it is documented in the text of the *The Masque of Blackness*, the chief masquer was Queen Anne, and among the dancers, there were the Countess of Bedford, the Countess of Suffolk, Lady Anne Herbert, Lady Susan Herbert, and Mary Wroth (Jonson [1605] 1890, 45). The plot is quite simple: the daughters of Niger set on a journey with their father in order to find a land the name of which ends with "tania" where the sun is hot and "forms all beauty, with his sight" (Jonson [1605] 1890, 41). The reason for the travel is the daughters' sudden awareness that their blackness is ugly. Finally, it turns out that they arrived in Britannia, and they are told that this is the land they were looking for. It is ruled by the Sun, that is King James "[w]hose beams shine day and night and are of force,/[t]o blanch an Ethiop and revive a cor'se" (Jonson [1605] 1890, 42).

The ideas to put women on stage (even if on a private one) and to thematise blackness have several implications. First of all, on Renaissance court stages, women could only be mute masquers. *The Masque of Blackness* followed this decorum properly, so the ladies wore masks, carried symbolic properties, and they could only participate in the masquers' dance. This dance at the end was displayed as the most significant part of the show, and it also involved the courtly audience. Speaking parts were most probably acted out by professional actors, and female speaking parts were played by boys. The structure of the court masque was brought to perfection by Jonson himself, when he included the witches in *The Masque of Queens* (1609) and the satyrs in *Oberon* (1611). The antimasque was performed and danced – contrary to the masquers' ballet, these were highly acrobatic and theatrical dances – by real actors, and it represented the world of

misrule and grotesque disorder.<sup>4</sup> It was followed by the main masque, which did not only emphasise the triumphs of the royal masquers upon the monstrous creatures committed to folly and vice, but it also showed the victory of the ideal world of poetry over popular entertainment (Orgel 1970, 3).

According to the rules of masque making, the place of female performers was in the main masque part. Although in *The Masque of Blackness*, which is an early piece, one cannot talk about the four-part structure that later masques usually have (prologue, antimasque, main masque, reveals), the black nymphs carry the characteristics of antimasque figures. In other words, since *Blackness* is admittedly and expressly incomplete in terms of plot, one might argue that it is the antimasque part of a two-part performance and that the mute female masquers are antimasque characters made very spectacular and conspicuous by the symbolic properties and the costumes designed by Inigo Jones. The speaking and singing parts were taken by professional actors, while women could only dance. Since the text in fact represented the quality of blackness as a disorder, it can be taken as the antimasque to *The Masque of Beauty*, in which the ultimate resolution comes. In this way, the black daughters of Niger connote the grotesque figures of the antimasque. According to the description of Francis Bacon in his “Of Masques and Triumphs” (1612), “they have been commonly of fools, satyrs, baboons, wild men, antics, beasts, spirites, witches, Ethiopes, pigmies, turquets, rustics, Cupids, statua’s moving, and the like” (Bacon [1612] 1908, 177). As Peacock argues, since the characters of the antimasque were played by professional actors later in the history of the court masque, the designer had more freedom to compose the setting and the costumes of these scenes (Peacock 1995, 130). The royal

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<sup>4</sup> As Jonson argues in *The Masque of Queens*, “and because Her Majesty (best knowing that a principal part of life, in these spectacles, lay in their variety) had commanded me to think on some dance or show, that might precede hers, and have the place of a foil, or false masque [...] and therefore now devised that twelve women in the habit of hags or witches, sustaining the persons of Ignorance, Suspicion, Credulity, &c. the opposites to good Fame, should fill that part; not as a masque but a spectacle to strangeness” (Jonson [1609] 1890, 102).

performers, thus, can be associated with real actors and actresses. For this reason, criticism which targeted *The Masque of Blackness* seems to be even more meaningful and understandable – as well as the self-conscious intention of the queen to play an antimasque character even more daring – because the symbolism of blackness, strangeness, ugliness, disorder, and acting overlap. To give a characteristic example, one may notice that Mary Wroth was called a “Hirmophradite in show, in deed a monster” by Sir Denny after she published her *Urania* (Wynne-Davies 1992, 93). The term hermaphrodite was also a common word used for boy actors, moreover, curiously, it was associated with black people. The Stationer’s Register in 1580 had a record about a child, who was claimed to be a “monster with a black face, the Mouth and Eyes like a Lyon, which was both male and female” (quoted in Newman 1991, 52).

The idea of the discontentment with blackness could have originated in the emblem called “Impossibile” (“The Impossible”) from Andrea Alciato’s well-known emblem book, *Emblematum Liber*.<sup>5</sup> The drawing on Emblem 59 shows two white men washing a black man, and the lines say: “Why do you wash, in vain, the Ethiopian? O forebear: no one can brighten the darkness of black night” (Alciato [1621] 1995, np). This emblem was later taken over by Geoffrey Whitney in *A Choice of Emblems* (1586). The image remains the same, and the poem emphasises that Nature is over human power, and simple individuals cannot solve unchangeable things. Since there is a reference to the washing of the Ethiopian in the text of the masque – Jonson usually relates his described images to emblems in his text – the symbolism of blackness has a clear explanation. James I, the representative of the sun, who is raised to a superhuman level – which is also signified by his elevated seat in the middle of the auditorium – has greater power than nature. Thus, the daughters of Niger receive a promise that

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<sup>5</sup> The work had many publications in the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the first complete edition with 104 emblems was published in 1531 in Augsburg.



their blackness is going to be turned to beauty. It is especially interesting to consider that, as Jonson explains in the foreword to *Blackness*, it was the queen's special request that she wanted to be blackened: "it was her Majesty's will to have them [the courtiers] blackamoors at first" (Jonson [1605] 1890, 35). It was a common Renaissance topos that black women are ugly (Hall 1994, 192). On the one hand, being costumed as black people was popular in England at festivals during the preceding decade, and on the other hand, black-moors in public plays – such as Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* – were associated with the underworld; devils, beggars, gypsies, and other monstrous creatures, which were also synonyms of the "masterless men", vagabonds, jugglers, and all kinds of public entertainers as well as common players (Newman 1991, 80-81).<sup>6</sup> So, besides wanting to enhance the masque with exoticism, Queen Anne's rather provocative idea to mask herself and her court ladies as black nymphs might be ascribed to her devotion to theatre and acting.<sup>7</sup>

The *Masque of Blackness* was a novelty for several reasons. It was only the second occasion that Queen Anne stepped onto the stage – her first appearance was in Samuel Daniel's *Vision of the Twelve Goddesses*, where she played Pallas Athena – and it was Ben Jonson's and Inigo Jones' debut in front of the court. Moreover, as Orgel puts it, the masque's most striking innovation was its theatricality, because it was the first time that the single point perspective, mechanical motion, and other stage effects were applied (Orgel 1970, 4). The performance evoked strong negative reactions. The most famous one was expressed by Sir Dudley Carleton. "At night", he wrote, "we had the Queen's

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<sup>6</sup> As Gamini Salgado argues, the "minions of the moon" were gypsies, who were thought to be the descendants of the ancient Egyptians at the age. They were known to live on the road, thus, identified with rogues living upon palmistry and other kinds of street amusement (Salgado 1997, 149-164).

<sup>7</sup> The same interest of theatre can be mentioned in connection with other female masquers like Queen Henrietta Maria, who wrote, directed, and played in her own masque in 1626. Also, Lady Mary Wroth, the poet-playwright was influenced by her role in *The Masque of Blackness* to a great extent. For more details, see Sharpio 1989, 187-194 and Hagerman 2001.

Maske in the Banqueting-House, or rather her Pagent” (quoted in Orgel 1965, 113). The use of this particular word “Pagent” is significant, because it has theatrical overtones, and it seems to be proved that the noble audience could have been impressed by the masque as if they saw a (public) theatrical performance. Carleton gives a detailed description of the scenery and he does not forget about the female performers. Above all, he finds it out of decorum that all their faces were painted black. It is no wonder that he took it as a scandal, since this is said to be the first recorded use of black paint as disguise instead of masks, which was more common in courtly theatre. Face-painting was among the major reasons for attacking players (Barish 1981, 103). Carleton reports the following:

At the further end was a great Shell in form of a Skallop, wherein were four seats; on the lowest sat the Queen with my lady Bedford; on the rest were placed the Ladies Suffolk, Darby, Rich, Effingham, Ann Herbert, Susan Herbert, Elizabeth Howard, Walsingham, and Bevil. Their Apparell was rich but too Curtizan-like for such great ones. Instead of Vizzards, their Faces and Arms up to the Elbows, were painted black, which was Disguise sufficient, for they were hard to be known; but it became nothing so well as their red and white, and you cannot imagine a more ugly Sight, then a troop of lean-cheek'd Moors (quoted in Wynne-Davies 1992, 88).

In another letter, he even calls the Queen and her companion “Actors” “strangely attired in Barbaresque mantells” (Wynne-Davies 1992, 88). The noble performers in *The Masque of Blackness*, for this reason, got a response which was very similar to those of foreign actresses of popular stages, since the performance used images that could be connected to popular actresses and boy-actors. The words of Carleton are very similar to the ones for which William Prynne was deprived of his ears and imprisoned somewhat later. Although it is not proved that with “Women-Actors, notorious whores”, Prynne reflected to the Queen then, the statement was held to be a deep offence on the royal theatricals (Orgel 1975, 39). Orgel says that in the case of royal performers, acting was out of question, because a lady or a gentleman participating in a masque remains a lady or a

gentleman (Orgel 1975, 39). In fact, however, actors on public stages also remained actors who played parts. Instead, the crucial difference between royal and public might be that actors surely regarded themselves as actors, while there is no evidence what female masquers regarded themselves to be. Nevertheless, if one takes female performers' theatrical interests into consideration – as I referred to the cases of Lady Mary Wroth and Queen Henrietta Maria earlier – one might consider them as the first women who consciously channelled their creative energies into stage activity.

Defining the actor or the actress in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries is a controversial issue. As Sandra Richards argues, it is not even clear whether the idea of the early modern “actress” is identical with the one that spoke dialogues on the stage, or simply a woman on stage (Richards 1993, 3). What the above mentioned statement by Orgel suggests that acting is defined by transformation and character impersonation. However, being an actor is not necessarily the question of submerging one's personality into the role. Moreover, if one takes acting in a broader sense, ballet dancers, clowns, acrobats, and the like – in whose cases, complete identification with the role is hardly imaginable – should have been classified as actors as well. So, it seems that being an actor does not depend on the enacted role or the extent of transformation. Actors are rather those who define themselves as actors and are acknowledged by the spectators as such. This appears to be the case with Queen Anne and her companion if one considers the expostulation of the noble audience. However, self-judgement of these noble players remains a riddle, since they are mute hieroglyphs both on- and offstage.

The solution of the riddle presented in the antimasque gives way to the main masque, *The Masque of Beauty*. The significant action, that is the transformation from blackness to beauty, or, more exactly, the disappearance of blackness, however, takes place somewhere between the two masques. In the latter performance, the nymphs are already non-black at their first appearance. The

unstaged metamorphoses might have been necessary not only because it was the original idea to glorify the King by emphasising the emergence of the Sun. Also, the black daughters should have been whitened in terms of their qualities of strangeness. This latter masque was, accordingly, decorous and very well received. As the Venetian Ambassador put it:

[*The Masque of Beauty* was] worthy of her Majesty's greatness. The apparatus and the cunning of the stage machinery was a miracle, the abundance and beauty of the light immense, the music and the dance most sumptuous. But what beggared all else and possibly exceeded the public expectation was the wealth of pearls and jewels that adorned the Queen and her ladies (quoted in Janicka-Swidorska 1992, 78).

The central scenic image of this masque is the "Throne of Beauty" (Jonson [1608] 1890, 50). Around it, there are the elements of Beauty, and on the steps, there are numerous Cupids. Both the throne with the allegory of Harmony sitting on it and the steps with the Cupids were moving, and thus, symbolising the universe ruled by harmony, beauty and love. The white daughters of Niger in their dance – which was "full of excellent device and change" (Jonson [1608] 1890, 55) and ended in a diamond shape – enacted their physical and spiritual glory. As the first song tells us, the world had been lighted and moved out of Chaos, since the world and the characters of the antimasque were replaced by the main masque, and the ladies who were varied in their beauties.

Although Alciato's Emblem 59 on the washing of the moor represents the impossibility of changing nature, it seems that finally, Jonson could wash the "Aethiop" white. The foreign black ladies associated with the disordered antimasque, with physical performance and marked bodily presence were turned into white dancers in the main masque. This well-prepared and guided change is, of course, defined as a necessary and inevitable transformation as opposed to the unmanageable, chaotic misrule in the antimasques. It could not have happened otherwise, for the masque, as a politically constructed and controlled genre had to

represent the eternal and solid royal power. There is a multiple display of authority here, since from the peculiarity of the ladies, attention is directed to the king. King James staged in the masque represents the mastery, which can even alter the unchangeable. The author, Ben Jonson has a similar kind of strength: he is able to erase otherness and convert it into normal again. The oddity and the glamour of the whole event is that ambiguity and change are fundamental features in every form of theatre and performance. Therefore, even is the mute female masquers are whitened, with their (female) presence on stage – especially in the context of the all-male stage of the English Renaissance – otherness is denoted.

Beside the fact that Jonson followed the courtly decorum, the metamorphosis thematised in the masques analysed above represent his vague and contradictory relationship to theatre and performance. Also, it cannot be accidental that this uncertainty is connected to the female performers, who remained “mute hieroglyphics” as far as their intentions are concerned. We might argue if they could be considered as the first English actresses, but the consequence of their reticence or reduction to silence is that they have quite an undefined position in theatre history.

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