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## **“Actors” in “Barbaresque Mantells”**

### **The Blackness of the Female Performers in Ben Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness***

Ben Jonson’s successive masques *The Masque of Blackness* and *The Masque of Beauty* have generally been interpreted in terms of Neo-Platonic symbolism and imagery. However, since these court masques were not only pieces of written poetry, but also well-organised spectacles, it might be of interest to approach them from the perspective of performance and in comparison to popular theatre. The present paper discusses how theatricality, popular entertainment, acting, and professional players are connoted by the “blackness” and the changeable nature of the female masquers in Ben Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness*. Considering his ambiguous and vehement relationship to the stage designer Inigo Jones, I am also examining Jonson’s antitheatrical attitude and his struggle to keep his poetry “white,” “beauteous,” at a distance from the mutability of performance.

#### **1**

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*, 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.<sup>1</sup> She does not mention a word about court plays; however, performances of the royal court could have been influenced by popular drama, since 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 in touch

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1. Sandra Richards, *The Rise of the English Actress* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 1–5.

with popular playmaking, they could have gathered real theatrical interests, and it is possible to examine them in relation to public performance.

Within this context, in this paper I am going to discuss Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* (1605), focusing on the symbolism of blackness and its relation to the female performers. This masque, together with its sequel, *The Masque of Beauty* (1608), has been interpreted by D. J. Gordon,<sup>2</sup> Stephen Orgel,<sup>3</sup> and others concerning their emblematic background and Neo-Platonic imagery. It also has been proved that Jonson's masques, especially their anti-masque parts, carry the characteristics of popular entertainments.<sup>4</sup> What I would like to suggest is that blackness – besides its Neo-Platonic association to Darkness, Night, Death, etc., and the performers being female, alien, and black – has a certain theatrical connotation as well. In other words, their “black” condition in *The Masque of Blackness* relates the female masquers to popular (male) players. So what I intend to point out is that the first English women on stage – at least as far as the reactions of their audience is concerned – are not that far from being the first English “actresses.”

Since my special interest is theatre history and performance – and in this case, female players – in the 16th and 17th centuries, it is important to note that I am mainly treating the masque as a theatrical phenomenon. Thus, as I am going to explain it in more detail later, I am concentrating on *The Masque of Blackness* as a possible *mise en scène*. Moreover, in my argumentation, I am using Jonson's other masque – *The Masque of Beauty* – as a counterpoint to my main object of study, which is *The Masque of Blackness*, because that later piece seems to represent the “normal” condition of female Jonsonian masquers, that is, non-blackness and beauty.

## 2

The masque, as Graham Parry explains, was primarily a political construct, and it focused on the emblematic celebration of the monarchy.<sup>5</sup> The major spectator of the

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2. D. J. Gordon, *The Renaissance Imagination* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 138–45.

3. Stephen Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 120–8.

4. Irena Janicka-Swidorska, *Dance in Drama: Studies in English Renaissance and Modern Theatre* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1992), pp. 72–3.

5. Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restor'd: The Culture of the Stuart Court 1603–42* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), p. 89.

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 audiences' attention.<sup>6</sup> Boundaries between stage and auditorium were erased, and the King was not only a part of the audience, but also of the spectacle.<sup>7</sup> The auditorium and the arrangement of the seats were just as well-organised as the production itself, and the whole spectacle was composed to be the living emblem of the monarch's eternal grace.<sup>8</sup> This is the case in *The Masque of Blackness*, too. Although James I never played roles in masques, in this one, he was lifted to a superhuman level, which was made clear in the plot as well as by his elevated royal seat in the centre of the space. His role was to overwrite the rules of nature and to make beauty out of blackness, thus solving the conflict of the play.<sup>9</sup> However, besides aiming at staging constant and stable political power, by the political content, the court masque was simultaneously directed to history and time.<sup>10</sup>

When approaching the masque from a theatrical perspective, one finds a similar uncertainty in terms of defining the genre's mutability and permanence. Royal performances used Greek and Roman mythology, well-known Renaissance topoi, and emblem books as well as English folklore, and they were created in a way that the authors counted on the audience's foreknowledge and the classical courtly 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 was to strengthen this picture. However, the masque as theatre – just as any other performance – was once-living and mutable by nature. So transmutation and change in the masque were not only indicated by the political content, but also by the very fact that the masque took the form of performance, and the characters were played partly by courtmen, partly by professional players. At the same time, although on the one hand, mythological and allegorical setting empha-

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6. Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theatre in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1975), p. 14.

7. Gregory A. Wilson, "The Problem in the Middle: Liminality in the Jonsonian Masque," *Limen: Journal for Theory and Practice of Liminal Phenomena* 1 (2001). Retrieved on July 2, 2003. <[http://limen.mi2.hr/limen1-2001/gregory\\_a\\_wilson.html](http://limen.mi2.hr/limen1-2001/gregory_a_wilson.html)>.

8. Stephen Kogan, *The Hieroglyphic King: Wisdom and Idolatry in the Seventeenth-Century Masque* (London, Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1986), p. 30.

9. Graham Parry, "The Politics of the Jacobean Masque," in *Theatre and Government Under the Early Stuarts*, eds. J. R. Mulryne and M. Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 87–117, p. 93.

10. Kogan, p. 30.

sised the immortality of the royals, by being players on the stage, they inevitably became the image of the fallen man disapproved by antitheatricalists.<sup>11</sup>

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-as-text and drama-as-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 spectacular and theatrical – Caroline masque. He also points out that although the consideration of the genre as spectacle is essential, but “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.”<sup>12</sup> This argument might be edifying considering any contemporary debate on the superiority of drama and/or performance in theatre and drama studies. So although in this paper, as I mentioned above, the emphasis is on the theatrical representation of the masque, I do not intend to degrade or ignore the literary values of the genre.

On Renaissance private stages, women could only be mute masquers. *The Masque of Blackness* followed this decorum very properly, so they wore masks, carried symbolic properties, and they could only participate in the masquers’ dance. The dance at the end was performed as the most important 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 boy actors. The structure of the court masque was brought to perfection by Jonson, when he included the antimasque with the witches of *The Masque of Queens* (1609) and the satyrs of *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>13</sup> It was followed by the

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11. A characteristic example of this is William Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*, which is full of ceremonies and spectacles. By introducing a masque in Act I Scene iii, for instance, what is achieved is discomfort and contrast between the sombre atmosphere of the play (*Henry VIII*) and the harmonious pastoral scene. What is more, the king playing a shepherd and wooing Anne might represent a fallible human being instead of a powerful monarch. For more details on *Henry VIII* and the masque, see John D. Cox, “*Henry VIII* and the Masque,” *ELH* 45 (1978) 390–409.

12. Kogan, p. 31. For the overview on masque criticism up to the 1970s, see Kogan, pp. 27–31.

13. As Jonson argues, “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

main masque, which did not only emphasise the triumph 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.<sup>14</sup>

According to the rules of masque making, the place of female performers was in the main masque part. Although in the case of *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, revels), the black nymphs carry the characteristics of antimasque figures.<sup>15</sup> 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.

So while in 17th-century England – contrary to other European theatrical traditions – women were not allowed to appear on public stages, the first (noble) women performers found the way to get on stage in the court masque. It seems that Queen Anne and other women of the court made use of this willingly. The scripts were written by Ben Jonson, whose enthusiasm towards theatre, however, seems to be questionable at many points. Jonson's ambiguous attachment to theatre in relation to *The Masque of Blackness* will be elaborated in the following section.

### 3

Although before 1660–62, there were no actresses in English public theatres, theatregoers, antitheatrical writers, and dramatists had remarks on foreign female performers, and especially puritan pamphlets attacked those "hog-faced women" from

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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, etc., the opposites to good Fame, should fill that part, not as a masque but a spectacle of strangeness" (*The Masque of Queens*, 9–17). All parenthesised references to *The Masque of Queens* and *The Masque of Blackness* (hereafter *Blackness*) are from David Lindley ed., *Court Masques: Jacobean and Caroline Entertainments* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). The parenthetic numbers refer to lines.

14. Stephen Orgel, "Introduction," in *Ben Jonson: Selected Masques*, ed. Stephen Orgel (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1970), 1–39, p. 3.

15. For more on the structure the court masques, see Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque*, pp. 36–67.

Italy and France who participated in plays and entertainments.<sup>16</sup> Though English theatre fans, actors and dramatists – such as Thomas Heywood – spoke in admiration about Italian and French travelling troupes – including women – whom they could see in England, puritans did not only associate actresses with whores and women of easy moral, but also with the devil.<sup>17</sup>

As Jonas Barish argues, Jonson was also an antitheatricalist 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.<sup>18</sup> His deep suspicion towards theatricality can be detected both in his plays and masques as well as in his theoretical works. He believed that playgoers visited theatre in order to parade their fine clothes so as to make spectacles and to compete with the play, and as for stagecraft, he was to a great extent against “painting and carpentry.”<sup>19</sup> In his *Timber; or Discoveries*, for instance, he announces one of the most typical fears of puritan antitheatricalists; namely that the player cannot rule the roles he plays.

Every man, forgetfull of himselfe, is in travaile with expression of another.  
Nay, wee too insist in imitation 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.<sup>20</sup>

Also, in his city comedies, role-playing and disguising usually have negative connotations.<sup>21</sup> Although his plays were realised on stage, he thought of them as literary entities and reading experience rather than theatre. He found the actor’s voice and the public’s ear unpredictable and untrustworthy elements over which he had too little control. This prejudice against the momentary or mutable nature of the performance is perhaps the most important aspect of Jonson’s antitheatrical-

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16. Ann Thomson, “Women / ‘Woman’ and the Stage,” in *Woman and Literature in Britain 1500–1700*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 100–16, p. 104.

17. Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 92.

18. Barish, pp. 133–40.

19. Barish, p. 133.

20. Ben Jonson, “Timber; or Discoveries,” in *The Entire Works Vol. 8: The Poems, The Prose Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 559–649, p. 597.

21. Cf. *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. More on Jonson’s antitheatricalism in his comedies is in Barish, pp. 147–53.

ism, and this ambiguous attitude towards theatre is detectable in his court masques as well.<sup>22</sup>

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 as 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* (11–2). Nevertheless, at the beginning of his career as a writer of masques, he seemed to accept that the masque – or theatre 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" (1–2). 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.

As I mentioned above, for Jonson, the poet-playwright, the masque was fundamentally about the verse, character, and dialogue, while for Jones, the designer, it was about scenery and performance.<sup>23</sup> However, despite his own arguments, as I referred to it earlier, Jonson should not have been against spectacle to the extent as he seems at first sight. Although he made the masque literature, in fact, he could not deny that as a theatrical genre, it originated in various stage entertainments. Moreover, as Jonson himself put it in his first masque, their "honour and splendour" was in the performance. If one considers masque as theatre, it becomes clear that – just like every kind of performance –, on the one hand, it is changeable, unstable, and mutable by nature, and 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 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 to fight against Jones, who was not really a man of words.<sup>24</sup>

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22. Barish, pp. 135–40.

23. See the Wilson article mentioned above.

24. Unfortunately, we only know the debate of Jones and Jonson mostly from the Jonsonian side. Jones was primarily a painter and an architect, and he never even wrote a treatise. His *Stone-Heng Restored* (1655) was put together by his student, John Webb about twenty-five years after his death. For more details on this, see John Peacock, *The Stage Designs of Inigo Jones: The European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For more on the debate of Jones and Jonson, see Parry, pp. 176–80.

The tension between text and spectacle is made very clear with the distinction between the “body” and the “soul” of the masque made by Jonson in the introduction to *Hymenaei* (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.<sup>25</sup>

Here, the “bodily part,” which is a metaphor of spectacle, theatre, or performance, is told to be “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 argues with the support of Protestant iconoclasm behind him, and assumes that the crucial function is language.<sup>26</sup>

*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 accomodate 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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup>

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 mutable and evanescent by Jonson, on stage, from a theatrical perspective, it is always

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25. Jonson, *Hymenaei*, 1–9. All parenthesised references to *Hymenaei* are from Stephen Orgel ed., *Ben Jonson: Selected Masques* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970). The parenthetic numbers refer to lines.

26. Peacock, p. 38.

27. Jonson, “Timber; or Discoveries,” pp. 609–10.

28. “So much for the bodily part, which was of Master Inigo Jones his design and act” (72–4).



for stressing what the performance has to tell the audience, and for engraving things on their mind. Counting on the spectators' visual memory, the aim of every performance is to provide them with a lasting, memorable experience. In other words, although poets like Jonson might have protested against the metaphoric power of theatre – which is the same prejudice against sight in puritan antitheatrical writings – at the same time, as theatre-makers, they had to admit that spectacle was intended to serve the preservation of the experience or the lasting effect created in the spectator.

An interesting addition to the Jones–Jonson polemic is that Jonson, in a mocking way, frequently associates Jones (and also theatre) with a foreign land, Italy. In one of his epigrams, Jonson calls Jones “th’Italian” who makes his way in the world by miming.<sup>29</sup> Beside that this refers to the fact that Jones learned everything about theatre in Italy, what Jonson’s discriminatory attitude recalls is antitheatrical writers on Italian theatre makers.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4

*The Masque of Blackness* and its sequel, *The Masque of Beauty* were the first two productions of Jonson. Though probably the original idea was about staging the metamorphosis from blackness to beauty, the first part, which contained the promise of a second one, was presented in 1605. The continuation was performed only in 1608. As it is documented in the text of the masque, 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 (244–55). The plot of *The Masque of Blackness* 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” (171). 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

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29. “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” (“On The Townes Honest Man,” quoted in Barish, p. 145).

30. A similar attitude of antipathy is detectable in *Volpone* where the corrupt Venice provides ground to the manipulative actions of Volpone and his company. A very characteristic scene of this is Act II Scene ii, in which Volpone is disguised as Scoto of Mantua, an Italian mountebank, in order to try to seduce Celia.

looking for. It is ruled by the Sun, that is King James, “Whose beams shine day and night and are of force, / To blanch and Ethiop and revive a cor’sse” (225–6).

The idea of the discontentment with blackness could have come from the emblem called “Impossibile” (“The Impossible”) from Alciato’s *Emblematum Liber*. The drawing shows two white men washing a black man (“Why do you wash, in vain, the Ethiopian? O forebear: no one can brighten the darkness of black night”).<sup>31</sup> This emblem was later taken over by Geoffrey Whitney in *A Choice of Emblems* (1586). The drawing remains the same, and the poem emphasises that Nature is of power, and human beings cannot do anything with 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 quite clear explanation. James I, the representative of the Sun, who is raised to a supernatural level – which is also symbolised by his elevated seat in the middle of the auditorium – has greater power than nature. Thus, the daughters of Niger get a promise that their blackness is going to be turned to beauty. What is interesting to consider is that, as Jonson explains, “it was her Majesty’s will to have them [the courtiers] blackamoors at first” (18).

It was a common Renaissance topos that black women are ugly.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, being disguised as black people was popular in England at festivals during the preceding decade,<sup>33</sup> and on the other hand, black-moors in public plays – cf. *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.<sup>34</sup> Thus, besides wanting to enhance the masque with exoticism, Queen Anne’s quite

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31. Alciato, *Emblematum Liber: Reprinted from the 1621 Edition*, ed. William Baker, Mark Feltham, and Jean Guthrie (1995). Retrieved on June 15, 2004. <<http://www.mun.ca/alciato>>.

32. Kim F. Hall, “‘I Rather Would Wish to Be a Black-Moor’: Beauty, Race, and Rank in Lady Mary Wroth’s *Urania*,” in *Woman, ‘Race,’ and Writing in Early Modern Period*, ed. M. Hendricks & P. Parker (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), 178–94, p. 192.

33. Marion Wynne-Davies, “The Queen’s Masque: Renaissance Woman and the Seventeenth-Century Court Masque,” in *Gloriana’s Face: Women, Public and Private in the English Renaissance*, ed. S. P. Cerasano & M. Wynne-Davies (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 79–104, p. 89, and Thomson, pp. 104–5.

34. Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 80–81. For more on ‘Egyptians’ in 16th- and 17th-century England, see Gãmini Salgãdo, *The Elizabethan Underworld* (Phoenix Mill, Thrupp, Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1992), Chapter 8, “Minions of the Moon.”

provocative idea to mask herself and her courtiers as black nymphs might be ascribed to her devotion to theatre and acting.<sup>35</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.<sup>36</sup> 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 Maske in the Banqueting-House, or rather her Pageant."<sup>37</sup> The use of this particular word, 'pageant,' is significant, because since, in 1605, it has theatrical overtones, it seems to be proved that the noble audience could have been impressed by the masque as theatre. 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 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.<sup>38</sup> 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

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35. 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 Michael Sharpio, "Lady Mary Wroth Describes a 'Boy Actress,'" *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 4 (1989) 187–94 and Anita Hagerman, "'But Worth pretends': Discovering Jonsonian Masque in Lady Mary Wroth's Pamphilia and Amphilantus," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 6. 3 (2001). Retrieved on August 10, 2002. <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/06-3/hagewrot.htm>>.

36. Orgel, "Introduction," p. 4.

37. Quoted in Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque*, p. 113.

38. Barish, p.103.

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.<sup>39</sup>

In another letter, he even calls the Queen and her companion “Actors” “strangely attired in Barbaresque mantells.”<sup>40</sup>

The noble performers of *The Masque of Blackness*, thus, 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, the author of *Histrion-Mastix* was deprived of his ears and imprisoned more than twenty years 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.<sup>41</sup>

At this point, let me refer to the issue of acting briefly. Orgel says that in the case of royal performers, “acting was out of question,”<sup>42</sup> because “a lady or gentleman participating in a masque remains a lady or gentleman.”<sup>43</sup> In fact, however, actors on public stages also remained *actors* who played parts. Instead, the crucial difference between royal and public players 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 16th and 17th centuries is a controversial issue. As Sandra Richards argues, it is not even clear whether a 16th–17th-century “actress” means the one that spoke dialogues on stage, or simply a woman on stage.<sup>44</sup> What the above mentioned statement of Orgel suggests is 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, since even today, there are various schools and techniques of acting. Moreover, if one takes

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39. Quoted in Wynne-Davies, p. 88.

40. Wynne-Davies, p. 88.

41. Orgel, *The Illusion of Power*, p. 44.

42. Orgel, “Introduction,” p. 3.

43. Orgel, *The Illusion of Power*, p. 39.

44. Richards, p. 3.

acting in the broadest sense – not forgetting about non-European theatrical traditions either – ballet dancers, clowns, acrobats, and the like – in whose cases identification with the role is hardly possible – 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. Rather, actors are those that 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 hieroglyphics” both on- and offstage.

In *The Masque of Blackness*, according to the decorum, professional male actors took the speaking and singing parts, while women could only dance, but one cannot yet detect the four-part structure of later masques. However – as Orgel also refers – since *The Masque of Blackness* in fact represented the quality of blackness as disorder – just as Carleton noticed and observed – it can be taken as an antimasque to *The Masque of Beauty*, in which the ultimate resolution comes. In this way, on the one hand, the black daughters of Niger connote the grotesque figures of the antimasque.<sup>45</sup> 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. Thus, the antimasque was the territory of theatrical diversity.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, the royal performers in *Blackness* can be associated not only with antimasque creatures, but also with professional actors / boy-actors / actresses. For this reason, Carleton’s outcry seems to be even more meaningful and understandable, as well as the self-conscious intention of the queen to play an “antimasque character” – that is to take the masque of a professional player to enact “public theatre” within the masque – even more daring, because the symbolism of blackness, strangeness, ugliness, disorder and acting overlap.<sup>47</sup>

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45. See Francis Bacon’s “Of Masques and Triumphs” (1612): “Let anti-masques not be long; they have been commonly of fools, satyrs, baboons, wild men, antics, beasts, spirites, witches, *AEthiopes*, pigmies, turquets, *nymphs*, rustics, Cupids, statuas moving, and the like” (31) (my italics). All parenthesised references are to Francis Bacon, *Bacon’s Essays*, ed. F. Storr & C. H. Gibson (New York, Bombay: Longman, Green, and Co., 1898).

46. Peacock, p. 130.

47. To give another characteristic example, one may recall that Mary Wroth was called a “Hirmophradite in show, in deed a monster” by Sir Denny after she published her *Urania* (cf. Wynne-Davies, p. 93). The term “hermaphrodite” was also a common word to boy-actors, moreover, interestingly, it was associated with black people. The Stationer’s Register in 1580

The solution of the riddle in the antimasque (*The Masque of Blackness*) 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 between the two masques.<sup>48</sup> In *The Masque of Beauty*, the nymphs are already non-black at their appearance. This unstaged metamorphoses might have been necessary not only because it was the original idea to glorify the King by emphasising the influence of the Sun. Also, the black daughters should have been whitened in a “theatrical” sense, too; they had to be deprived of qualities of strangeness and public performance. This later masque, thus, was decorous and very well received. As the Venetian Ambassador puts 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.<sup>49</sup>

The central scenic image of this masque is the “throne of beauty.”<sup>50</sup> Around it, there are the eight elements of Beauty, and on the steps, there are several Cupids. Both the throne with Harmony sitting on it and the steps with the Cupids were moved 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” and ended in a diamond shape – enact their physical as well as their spiritual beauty. As the first song tells us, the world was “lighted” and moved “out of Chaos.” In other words, the world and the characters of the antimasque were replaced by the main masque and the ladies who “were varied in their beauties.”<sup>51</sup>

So finally Jonson washed the “Aethiop” white. The foreign black ladies associated with the antimasque, with performance and marked physicality, were turned into white dancers in the main masque. This well-prepared and guided change is, of course, defined as a necessary transformation from the unmanageable, chaotic misrule in antimasques. It could not have been otherwise, since the masque, as a politi-

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had a record about a child, which was said to be a “monster with a black face, the Mouth and Eyes like a Lyon which was both Male and Female” (quoted in Newman, p. 52).

48. Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque*, p. 128.

49. Quoted in Janicka-Swidarska, p. 78.

50. Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Beauty: Reprinted from the 1692 Folio*, ed. Clark J. Holloway. Retrieved on July 12, 2003. <<http://www.hollowaypages.com/jonson1692beauty.htm>>.

51. Jonson, *The Masque of Beauty*.

cally constructed and controlled genre, should have represented the eternal and stable royal power. The oddity and the glamour of the whole issue is that ambiguity and change is integral in every form of theatre by nature.

Besides the fact that Jonson followed courtly decorum, the metamorphosis of the blackened "antimasquers" into non-black masquers very well represents his vague and contradictory relationship to theatre. Also, it cannot be accidental that this uncertainty is related to the female performers of the masques that remained "mute hieroglyphics" as far as their own intentions are concerned. For this reason – although we may or may not call them the first English actresses – they have quite an undefined position in English Renaissance theatre history.