

Alterity and Assimilation in Jonson's Masques of *Blackness* and *Beauty*: «I, with so much strength / Of argument resisted»

WILLIAM OVER
ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Las piezas teatrales de Ben Jonson, The Masque of Blackness y The Masque of Beauty, contienen discursos secundarios sobre la naturaleza de la «alteridad» de la raza negra en la Inglaterra del siglo XVII, que reflejan las tensiones sociales existentes con respecto a las narrativas oficiales y el imaginario colectivo de la época. La transformación de un personaje de raza negra en protagonista que cuestiona, como forma de conservar su independencia y dignidad, la doctrina oficial encarnada por el estamento de la monarquía podría considerarse una reivindicación de la propia identidad racial. Sin embargo, tal discurso queda relegado a un segundo plano al encuadrarlo en la estructura y género teatrales de la mascarada, a pesar de que no se llegue a cuestionar la autoridad del mismo durante el transcurso de la pieza. De esta manera, se refleja la diversidad de los discursos contradictorios que circulaban en la sociedad de la época, así como los mecanismos utilizados para propiciar el cierre ideológico y textual de las creaciones artísticas en favor de las narrativas dominantes.

Two early court dramas of Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Blackness* (1605) and its plot sequel *The Masque of Beauty* (1608), depict the transformation of African people to Europeans. However, in the *Blackness* masque, an important counter voice momentarily interrupts the transformative activities of the play's agenda. Niger objects to the project of cultural absorption played before the English court audience. His argument in praise of African identity is a conspicuous speech of sixty-nine lines that includes a direct reference to European literary efforts to negate African identity. Niger's speech challenges current conceptions of the development of racial consciousness and the awareness of intercultural issues in the late Tudor and early Stuart periods. The struggle over meaning in these masques documents the divided nature of English racial and cultural attitudes, which recognized human difference but sought to avoid its implications in favor of attitudes more congruent with worldwide expansion and inter-European competition for global markets. How might the *aporia* of Niger's African affirmation be understood within a plot structure where he is verbally dismissed and then overshadowed by a royal *mise-en-scene* of spectacular costumes and innovative scenery? Jonson constructs an intercultural discourse wherein the African figures are fashioned familiar, commensurate with a seventeenth-century European ontology, in order to reduce the threat from other identities as England develops its nascent quest for global markets.

Although both masques construct the otherness of colonial exploration and trade so as to reflect the superiority of the Jacobean project to unite Great Britain and begin a belated global expansion, Niger's presence in *Blackness* remains a strong anti-colonialist statement. Moreover, the other black characters, Aethiopia and Niger's daughters, are exemplars of co-optation and assimilation. I suggest that *Blackness* retains a strongly argued voice of cultural opposition—even while valorizing Queen Anne and King James—in response to Britain's emerging global outreach, a circumstance that increased contact with other cultures just as it demanded both to understand and control such varieties of otherness.

Although Niger alone retains his outward and inward blackness, he is banished from the white realm of Albion. He thus becomes a necessary—but comfortably distant—other. A necessary other, because, as Homi Bhabha (1994: 111) observes, «The colonialist exercise of authority requires the production of differentiations, individuations, identity effects through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations that are tarred with the visible and transparent mark of power». Jonson's play thus presents a spectrum of assimilation: the fully co-opted Aethiopia, the soon-to-be transformed daughters of Niger, and a resistant Niger, whose arguments against cultural colonialism are never rebutted in the play.

Following his counter-discourse, Niger is abruptly banished from England by the co-opted Aethiopia. Left to stand on its own because never refuted in the play by formal argument, Niger's speech expresses an early repudiation of Jacobean cultural projections and articulates the particularities of the threat from global colonization. Furthermore, Jonson's marginal notes in the original printed edition use respected classical references to support many of Niger's assertions in defense of African ontology. These narrative intrusions reveal an ambivalence toward African people, who increasingly came before the eye of merchants abroad and ordinary people at home during the English Renaissance (Jordan, 1968: 56-60; Jones, 1971: 16; Andrews, 1984: 103-14; Barthelemy, 1987: 4-6). As thematic devices within the play's dominant discourse, however, they only enhance the masque's overall celebratory message of cultural and political superiority by including an easily defeated resistance movement. Niger's engaging rebuttal is ignored by his own apparent rejection of an African priority and by the play's dramatic and theatrical developments. Jonson's depiction of co-opted, transformed, and banished Africans is proleptic, an anticipation of the cultural and economic appropriations of British colonialism, which in the early Stuart era was beginning to imitate the colonial projects of other European powers undertaken in the sixteenth century.

As the English increased their contact with diverse peoples throughout the sixteenth century, new moral and ontological alternatives appeared, despite the muffling effects of dominant voices and official agendas. Niger's intrusion reflects a particularly complex response to these new alternatives. Although the speech of Niger is perhaps the most direct articulation of non-European alterity on the English Renaissance stage, it has not received appropriate critical attention (Cowhig, 1985; Stallybrass, 1988; Aasand, 1992; Andrea, 1999; MacDonald, 2002). Moreover, the important dialectic between Niger as advocate of African identity and Aethiopia as assimilated representative of the court of Albion has not been recognized. Aethiopia's stage management of the main action in *Blackness* is a particularly developed expression of the co-optation of non-European

identity on the Tudor / Stuart stage. Still, her machinations are provoked by the assertiveness of Niger's justifications for racial otherness.

Most sixteenth-century descriptions of Africans by European sea traders and explorers were largely negative, with some exceptions (Jordan, 1968; Barker, 1978; Tokson, 1982; Barthelemy, 1987; Campbell, 1988). Racial conceptions in early modern England developed with the expanding mercantile enterprise and the growing presence of people of color, who were particularly evident in the larger port cities. Jonson's allegory of African women who seek perfection by becoming white served as indices of James I's power and greatness. Through its explicit racial hierarchy, *Blackness* and *Beauty* celebrated Britain's recent identification as a world-class trader, intent on catching up with the more established trading cartels of Spain, Portugal, France, and Holland. The attempt to alter black skin by soliciting Albion the Sun-King of Britannia (representing James, seated in the king's box as onlooker) also valorized the Renaissance monarch who brings light to darkness by changing black to white. Missed by critics is the two masques' evocation of the long European tradition that associates the monarchy with powers for healing skin disorders. The African women are «healed» through a skin color change. Instead of removing rashes, Jonson's catharsis brings the promise of white identity.

In *Blackness* the attempt to eliminate perceptions of cultural difference is overtly successful, since the twelve African maidens are willingly changed to white (the actual transformation completed in *Beauty*). Instead of presenting theatrical visions that challenge Jacobean categories of race, power, and gender, the masques instead seem to reaffirm such notions. The threat posed by difference is erased by a simple white-out solution, and the African maidens, who are described by Niger in *Blackness* as «the first formed dames of earth», remain in England as subjects indistinguishable from other native English people, no longer possessing the original color of humankind (Herford and Simpson, 1925: 7: 173, 1: 138; hereafter all masque line references are from this edition).

Furthermore, since they have undertaken the journey from Africa to England out of their own desire to become white and therefore beautiful, their outward transformation is preceded by an inward conversion to European values. A long European tradition that Africans lamented their skin color, implying a universal preference for white ontology, began in the classical period and was frequently repeated in Renaissance literature. One sixteenth-century variation of the story is by the traveler John Lok, who found Africans «so scorched and vexed with the heat of the sun that in many places they curse it when it riseth» (Jones, 1971: 12). Jonson supplies his own version in *Blackness* and cites classical sources in the margins. His marginal references for the story are Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, and Pliny (II: 173-77). Still, as Carol Marsh-Lockett (1997: 160) points out, Jonson associates *Blackness* with the projection of Africa as the cradle of civilization, which he sought to connect with James' court. Kim Hall (1995: 117-118), among others, has pointed to the many positive European associations of blackness –including black beauty– that must stand alongside negative conceptions held throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Niger's defense of blackness and African culture fits within this positive associative framework.

Niger remains silent after being informed of his banishment from England and just before the customary masque dance of spectators and performers at the end of *Blackness*. He is upstaged by the powerful and fully assimilated Aethiopia, who already has been

whitened outwardly and inwardly. She dominates the remainder of the play and enforces the hierarchical ordering of the dramatic action. An instance of this ordering involves the adroit handling of the dancing stage performers, who are commanded to «Come away, come away» (l. 295) to the sea again, until their final transformation to white. These stage directions forestall the lingering contact of blackface performers with white audience members, enhancing the play's theme of racial transformation.

The Masque of Blackness was Jonson's first attempt at the masque form and first collaboration with Inigo Jones, the scenographer of the new Italian perspective. For this production Queen Anne suggested that she and noted ladies of her court appear onstage in blackface (Herford and Simpson, 1925: 7: 169). As twelve «daughters of Niger», they journey to Albion (England) to request that James change their color from black to white. Niger argues against the false values that esteem European over African beauty. Lamenting his daughters' ready acceptance of European values, Niger blames certain European poets, «Poore, brain-sicke men» (l. 156), who are responsible for introducing the superiority of fair over dark beauty. He fears the seductive power of these cultural trespasses, a force which has caused his daughters to abandon Africa in order to change their complexions to white. Niger's arguments for the priority of black physicality include evidence for the ever youthful appearance of the black body, a line of reasoning that supports the endurance of blackness against the threat of European cultural expansion.

Niger himself projects a complex identity within the masque's allegorical currents. As the embodiment of the river Niger, and the son of Oceanus, to whom all rivers flow, his blackness is essentialized as «the Aethiopes river» (l. 111). Also, his crown of cane gives him mercantile associations, since sugar was an early trading item in the West Indies and Asia. Niger asserts that his daughters have abandoned their true identities in blackness by slavishly pursuing the values of other cultures (ll. 135-203).

Niger identifies his own «herculean labors» (l. 133) as the constant effort to convince his daughters that «in their black the perfect'st beauty grows» (l. 144). The remark ironizes the popular English Renaissance saying, «You labor in vain to wash an Ethiop white». The saying, a version of which is later quoted in *Blackness* (ll. 254-55), was so commonly used that it could often be shortened, as in John Fletcher's *The Knight of Malta*, where Oriana's black maid Zanthiais is called «My little labor in vain» (l. 198). Niger's sarcasm challenges the masque's whitening project. Instead, he labors to retain his daughters' black identity. Aethiopia later pronounces Niger's banishment from Albion by returning the labor reference: «Thy *Daughters* labors have their period here, / And so thy errors» (ll. 233-34). Here «labors» evokes the original intent of the saying, to turn an African white. Aethiopia's figure of speech, «have their period here», finalizes the identity change of the Africans in Albion, just as it finalizes Niger's own banishment: «And so thy errors». Alterity is thus elimination, or controlled through the powers of Albion.

The main speech of Niger (ll. 135-203) counters the transformative agenda of Albion by prioritizing blackness. Though rhetorically brilliant, it is theatrically weak, since Niger's argument is abruptly upstaged by the sensational entrance of Queen Anne and her court ladies in blackface. Restating the chorus's contention that his daughters were «the first form'd dames of earth» (l. 138), he associates the idea of originality with the «African Sunne», who remains «the best judge, and most formal cause / Of all dames

beauties» (ll. 141-42). For Niger the male «Sunne» figure is more than a reified universal notion, transcendent from humankind. Instead, the «Sunne» demonstrates his affinity by judging women of black complexion superior to all others. Their «firme hiewes» are «signes of his fervent'st love; and thereby showes / That, in their black, the perfectst beauty growes» (ll. 142-44). That is, the «Sunne's» favor was amply bestowed on dark-complexioned women, since they have received more of his rays. Here black skin signifies divine blessing rather than the negative attributes of character common in negative Renaissance discourse. Jonson's marginal note for these lines, printed in the earliest editions, offers in support of Niger's position a classical reference for the idea that Africans were the earliest humans (Diodorus Siculus). Since no rational objection to Niger's case for African identity is attempted within the play by any character, his viewpoint remains rhetorically unchallenged, in fact supported by Jonson's references.

Niger advocates a reawakening of African identity by insisting upon the constancy of black physicality. Thus the black bodies of his daughters signify their enduring nature through «the fix'd colour of their curled haire», which «no age can change» (ll. 142-45). The permanence of African identity further associates with the color of black hair, which Jonson apparently thought does not change with age: «The fearfull tincture of abhorred Gray» (l. 148). Moreover, the durability of his daughters' black complexions contrasts favorably with «death [...] herselfe being pale and blue», who «Can never alter their most faithful hiew» (ll. 149-50). Niger expands his position to include moral values, grounding black physicality in strength of character. Their blackness allows the daughters to «stand from passion, or decay so free» (l. 154). It equips them to endure in freedom, beyond desire's debilitating effects. In this last argument, Niger fuses body and mind, the outward and inward aspects of human identity, since for Niger skin color, the most external part of the body, associates with the deepest traits of character, faithfulness, and constancy. Hence blackness involves more than outward hew; it in fact exists as a critical element of the daughters' imperiled identities, possessing redemptive potentialities. By shifting the level of argument from the aesthetics of «great beauties warre» (l. 152) to moral and existential issues, Niger changes an aesthetic contest into an ontological battle. As they misguidedly pursue Renaissance European sensibilities, Niger warns that his children risk losing more than their outward appearances.

Niger's speech engages a dualism of black and white quite familiar to early mercantile discourse, evident in the widely read travel collections of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, above all in the huge compilations of Hakluyt and Purchas. His assertion that the enduring nature of his daughters' blackness prevents them from yielding to «passion» disregards prevalent notions among early modern European explorers that Africans were excessively prurient (for example, Africanus, 1896: 1: 187). The novel enticements of European cultural projection, a force Niger reduces condescendingly to the term «poets», are resistible. His daughters need only rely upon the resources of their original identity, which, he reminds them, has lasted longer than any other ontology (l. 138).

At times the shifting discourse in *Blackness* undermines its rigid categories of black and white, momentarily questioning the play's valorization of Jacobean conceptions of racial hierarchy. One example is the ambivalent usage of heavily coded words such as «fair» and «bright». Niger is introduced with the epithet «Fayre» (l. 99). While intended as a form of polite address, «Fayre» refers to his general character, and possibly to his

refined bodily features (*OED*). Of course «fair» also suggests whiteness or lightness of skin. However, in the case of Niger, his blackness as an outward racial feature remains «firm», a «faithful hiew» within the iconography of the play: he is «in forme and colour of an Aethiope» (l. 50). Hence Niger's fairness also denotes inner qualities of character, and most significantly his faithfulness to an African identity. Since the black Niger is already «Fayre», the validity of his daughters' color change remains questionable. His stage introduction implies the existence of deeper identities not so easily removed by his daughters' anticipated color makeover. Hence Niger's presence contests «Albion the faire», England and James I, from whose «snowy cliffe» (l. 206) other skin colors are transformed to white.

Within the dominant discourse of the play, «fair» associates with the beauty contest of white over black, a pageant that has enthralled Niger's daughters, drawing them to the court of James. However, when introduced by Oceanus, the twelve daughters are described with explicit reference to the ambiguity of their color:

Though but blacke in face,
Yet, are they bright,
And full of life, and light.
To prove that beauty best,
Which not the colour, but the feature
Assures unto the creature.

(II. 103-08)

The passage questions the certainty of racial categories. Oceanus contrasts their brightness with the blackness of their skins, associating it with the inner qualities of character that make the daughters «full of life, and light». Thus their «feature» of brightness gives them a certain inner beauty. However, «feature», like color terminology, is an ambiguous term, implying facial characteristics but also qualities of personality. In this regard audience response to the original aristocratic performers in blackface must have been ambivalent if not perplexing. One Whitehall audience member found the sight «too light and Curtizan-like for such great ones» (Herford and Simpson, 1925: 10: 448). Spectators must certainly have recognized the Queen and most of her ladies in waiting. Both interpretations of «feature» are supported theatrically by Anne and her ladies, who as performers in blackface –not customary masks– presented European facial features under the make-up. The various sixteenth-century stage methods for represented Africans –visors, full masks, form-fitting dark clothing– did not reflect the European usurpation of African identity so fully as blackface, since make-up permits the underlying features of the white performers to remain apparent. As easily recognized personages of the court, the performers would have projected the grace and refinement expected of the Jacobean aristocratic personality. Although their particular brightness and blackness, together with their very late dramatic entrance, must have created a momentary *coup de theatre*, their perceptible European identities beneath the African skin color and costumes would have confirmed theatrically the dominance of white over black. Black becomes superficial and white the permanent reality. The theatrical appropriation of black identity by a British monarch in blackface becomes a variation of washing the Aethiope white.

The highly ambiguous figure of Aethiopia appears as the Moon, powerful but also quite fair in appearance, with white and silver garments, a silver throne, and a luminous headpiece. Niger refers to her «generall brightness» (l. 228), a feature that can reflect her most significant inner quality, the power of revelation, but must also indicate the outer quality of her white appearance. Niger requests of Aethiopia as «Goddess of our shore» (l. 224) to «Shew the place, / Which long, their longings urg'd their eyes to see. / Beautifie them, which long have deified thee» (ll. 229-31). Her brightness further associates with European inventive power, since originally Aethiopia appeared as a «bright face» (l. 234) to the twelve daughters by means of a reverberate glass, which she explains was first used by Pythagoras (ll. 234-37). Bearing a name long used by Europeans as a reductive reference to Africa and Africans, Aethiopia is nevertheless a powerful member of the court of Albion, whose whiteness indicates her previous transformation and co-optation. Her presence demonstrates the malleability of blackness within the realm of Albion. Unlike Niger, Aethiopia shows no defiance of white categorizations, indeed, she functions as a completely reliable civil servant of Albion. In this way she represents the foil of Niger. Where he is defiant and argumentative, she is fully assimilated, and her generic name implies the alterability of all black people.

Niger's sharp rebuttal to those European poets who are responsible for the low valuation of black identity becomes a direct rebuttal to Albion's transformative project:

Yet since the fabulous voices of some few
Poore braine-sicke men, stil'd *Poets*, her with you,
Have, with such envie of their graces, sung
The painted *Beauties*, other *Empires* sprung;
Letting their loose, and winged fictions flie
To infect all clymates, yea our puritie;

(ll. 155-60)

As a caveat against cultural intrusions, the passage shows affinity with modern forms of relativism. The caustic tone brought by the epithets, «fabulous voices» and «loose [...] winged fictions» indicts outside cultural threats. Niger's reference to the «fictions» that «infect all climates», robbing African «purity», is a quite early recognition of Europeanization.

Niger's example of one such loose winged fiction is Ovid's story of Phaethon, an etiology of blackness frequently retold by Renaissance poets (Jordan, 1968). As a result of Phaethon's «heedless flames», all «Aethiopes» are «blacke, with black dispaire» (ll. 162-64). In the classical poetic tradition, Africans revolted against their fallen state of blackness, desiring to be transformed to an original whiteness. By doing so they confirm the superiority of whiteness. Although in outward appearance quite different, the Africans possess the same values as Europeans. Similarly, when the daughters of Niger receive the news that they were at one time white, their reaction is violent: «They wept such ceaselesse teares» and «chardg'd [the Sunne's] burning throne / With volleys of revilings» (ll. 173-74). Confirming classical mythology, Jonson's African women respond as predicted, an action that undergirds longstanding notions of the originative nature of whiteness, which becomes primal, prior to other human identities, and hence universally desirable.

Niger's rebuttal of these racial appropriations is intentional: «To frustrate which strange error, oft, I sought» (l. 177). However, his arguments are interrupted by a sudden «miracle», which guides the twelve African women «To comfort of a greater Light, / Who formes all beauty, with his sight» (ll. 194-95). The light greater than the African Sunne is a flattering reference to James I, whose kingly powers, in Renaissance literary fashion, are reified in an enlightening Sun. This *deus ex machina* becomes a demonstration of James's nascent imperial power, as expressed through Inigo Jones's resplendent stage effects. Hence final European appropriation of the African daughters is not achieved through either rational persuasion or evidential demonstrations –what Niger esteems as his «strength / Of argument» (ll. 180-81)– but only by recourse to the irrational and seductive devices of Jones's new perspective scenography and special effects, which succeed in dazzling the twelve African women, Niger, and the Whitehall court audience.

Jonson's description of the African women's journey to England includes geographical imagery that is culturally as well as racially referential:

Blacke *Mauritania*, first; and secondly,
Swarth *Lusitania*; next we did descry
Rich *Acquitania* [...]

(ll. 198-200)

This *Land*, that now lifts into the temperate ayre
His snowy cliffe, is *Albion* the faire;

(ll. 205-06)

The itinerary includes lands whose inhabitants are increasingly lighter in skin color, until it ends at the «snowy cliffe» of Dover, which is also a reference to the white Albion, since Jonson notes in the margins of the quarto and folio editions that princes were often named after their princedoms (ll. 205-210). The black-to-white journey thus parallels the inner transformation of the twelve African women, as they eagerly flee their impermanent black identities for the contentment of a permanent whiteness, which can be found in its fullest form only in Albion. But the travel route also establishes a geographical hierarchy of nations and skin colors, leaving the darkest progressing to the lightest. Nation and race are associated and prioritized, while the colonized cross the borders of hierarchy. Jonson's gradations of skin color promote «Albion the faire» (l. 206), since he is chosen from among the highly competitive group of early seventeenth-century colonizing nations as the final destination and, therefore, as the whitest sovereign, a nationalist designation finding resonance much later during the colonialist era in the popular British saying, «The black man starts at Calais».

The «generall brightness» (l. 226) of Aethiopia mirrors the whiteness of Albion. Niger's response to the sudden arrival of Aethiopia is to plea that she guide his daughters to «the place, / Which, long, their longings urdg'd their eyes to see. / Beautifie them, which long have Deified thee» (ll. 229-31). Aethiopia answers by recommending the transforming power of James, who personifies the northern «Sunne» (l. 253). To this end she enlists standard neoplatonic imagery to cast James as an omnipotent ruler. His sunbeams «are of force / To blanch an Aethiope, and revive a Cor's» (ll. 254-55). Aethiopia's claim enlists a standard sixteenth-century English aphorism, which here expresses James's

power to do even the impossible. Moreover, Aethiopia's words are self-referential, since she herself represents such a blanching. Her brilliant silver costume dutifully reflects Albion's white hegemony.

Aethiopia immediately dismisses Niger's plea for African permanence: «Thy *Daughters* labors have their period here [in Albion] / And so thy errors» (ll. 233-34). By returning Niger's ironic allusion to the aphorism, «You labor in vain to wash an Aethiope white», Aethiopia places primary responsibility for the racial transformation upon the daughters of Niger, who have labored to wash their African identities away. Their change is voluntary, not forced. But her pronouncement includes another subtext. If Niger's «errors» (l. 234) signify both misconceptions and wanderings, then Niger is dislocated both intellectually and geographically. By denying the superior European standards of beauty, his «errors» of judgment place him in the unstable category of dislocated wanderer, one outside the normative center of Albion's unchanging identity. Niger alone must return to Africa (ll. 327-29); his daughters will «perfection have», that is, they will be turned white after a period in the ocean. They are carefully instructed to «Keep, still, your reverence to [Albion]» and «shout for joy» (ll. 359-61) for gaining his favor.

By becoming white the African women convert their non-European identities, but their transmutation signifies more than the attainment of European acceptability. More significance lies in the *convertibility* of their natures, which is within the power of the European sovereign as national identity: «His light scientiall is, and (past mere nature) / Can salve the rude defects of every creature» (ll. 256-57). Moreover, such transformations must be more than skin deep, as Jonson's *Irish Masque at Court* (1613) makes clear. There the uncouth Celtic clothing and behavior of the conquered Irish are transformed into acceptable Jacobean court dress and deportment (Herford and Simpson, 1925: 7: 399-405). The Irish «come a great [w]ay of miles to [see]» (l. 23) James, and they eagerly put on English garments to dance in courtly style. In the play's transformation scene, the colonized Irish nobles and footmen are changed during the playing of English court music, a regulative force that accompanies the alteration of their identities. In the *Blackness* and *Beauty* masques, the regulative force for conversion is the ocean, a geographical image associated with England's nascent maritime activity, since Albion is identified as Neptune's son in *Blackness* (ll. 207, 361). For the Irish as well as the Africans, an outward transformation follows an inward conversion, as both groups approach James's realm voluntarily, with the intent of assimilation. In each of these masques, the facile transformation of human identity celebrates Albion's (England's) centripetal force, the ability to subsume all difference into his (its) own power. When other cultures are so easily incorporated, England's aim of cultural expansionism becomes imminently realizable. Difference becomes alterable, not permanent.

Niger's argument directly challenges such conformist urges. He is threatened by the «Poore, brain-sicke men» who deny the permanence of African identity. The use of political language reveals an awareness of the cultural implications of such aggression: these men from «other *Empires* sprung» have sought «To infect all climates» (ll. 158, 160). His daughters are misguided in their desire to abandon what they cannot change by chasing after European ideals and denying their own identities. Anticipating Aethiopia's scornful dismissal of his beliefs (ll. 233-34), he finds that the «strange errors» (l. 177) lie on the side of the European poets, who have seduced his daughters by their literary deceits.

What Aethiopia sees as the errors of wandering must involve Aethiopia herself, since she had been assimilated earlier within Albion's white cliffs. Niger actively opposes these European transformations before being seduced by Aethiopia's miracle, «To frustrate which strange error, oft, I sought [...] till they confirm'd at length / By miracle, what I, with so much strength / Of argument resisted» (ll. 177-81).

The theatrically impressive entrance of Queen Anne and her ladies in blackface, enhanced by the first use of Italian scenic perspective on the English stage and Jones's brilliant costumes, renders Niger a voiceless supernumerary. The narrative task of reducing Niger's dramatic importance upon the arrival of Aethiopia and Queen Anne parallels the historical erasure or marginalization of non-European identities. Niger never appears in the sequel *Beauty*, but the dissonant figure of Night, «mad to see an *Aethiopo* washed white» (l. 81), challenges Albion's dominance by attempting to prevent the black to white transformation. Night's failure allows for «The glorious *Isle* [England]» to «take place / Of all the earth for Beautie» (ll. 126-27). Although the universalizing language valorizes while it grossly overestimates British maritime, naval, and cultural power in the Jacobean period, it is nonetheless prophetic of a longer history of British empire building, wherein the displacement of other cultures became obligatory.

The laws of monarchical power in *Blackness* and *Beauty* appear as an aesthetic arrangement, supporting categories that organize Jacobean reality. While the traditional dislocations of the court masque, with its later antimasque elaborations, allowed for a degree of otherness to intrude upon orthodox discourse, in fact, alternative views were delimited and tightly controlled within the corridors of Jacobean power (Welsford, 1927: 8-16, 134-41). This control was applied in part by the system of court patronage and personal recommendation, which chose playwrights for court productions. Jonson, for example, sought the prestigious office of Master of the Revels and gained appointment as masque writer in a highly competitive market through his patron, Lady Bedford, Queen Anne's close companion (Miles, 1986: 85-104; Riggs, 1989: 118-119). His personal commitments to the British monarchy must have allowed only brief or ambivalent digressions from celebratory court drama. Niger and Night are defeated in the end because they insist upon the permanence of black ontology, a position that opposes the general tendency of seventeenth-century Europe to regard African identity as transitory rather than enduring. Niger's abrupt banishment from Albion foreshadows the historical process of conquest and displacement in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, conquests that were not motivated by «strength / Of argument», but mainly by an urge for mercantile power and the spread of European populations.

Niger's speech against assimilation remains cogent and unanswered in the play. In a particular way, Matthew Martin's (2001: 154) general observation about Jonson's theatre as a «skeptical space» for «creative nonbeing» may apply to *Blackness*: Jonson himself took care to assert his own particular authority over the published records of *Blackness* and *Beauty*, distinguishing from the court ideology overtly proclaimed in the masque performances (Dutton, 1996: 23-24). Was the playwright consciously distancing himself from the transparent nationalistic and colonial enterprise of James, presenting a more complicated picture of cultural and colonial assimilation?

Works cited

- AASAND, H. (1992): «“To blanch an Ethiop and revive a corse”: Queen Anne and *The Masque of Blackness*», *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 32: 271-294.
- AFRICANUS, J. L. (1896): «They have great swarms of Harlots among them; whereupon a man may easily conjecture the manner of living» in BROWN, R. (ed.) (1896): *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained*. 3 vols., PORY, J. (Trans.), London, Hakluyt Society.
- ANDREA, B. (1999): «Black Skin, the Queen's Masques: Africanist Ambivalence and Feminine Author(ity) in the Masques of *Blackness and Beauty*», *ELR*, 29: 246-281.
- ANDREWS, K. R. (1984): *Trade Plunder and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480-1630*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- BARKER, A. (1978): *The African Link*, London, Frank Cass.
- BARTHELEMY, A. G. (1987): *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press.
- BHABHA, H. (1994): *The Location of Culture*, London and New York, Routledge.
- CAMPBELL, M. B. (1988): *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- COWHIG, R. (1985): «Blacks in English Renaissance Drama and the Role of Shakespeare's *Othello*» in DABYDEEN, D. (ed.) (1985): *The Black Presence in English Literature*, Manchester, Manchester University Press. 124-145.
- DUTTON, R. (1996): *Ben Jonson: Authority: Criticism*, New York, St. Martin's.
- HALL, K. F. (1995): *Things of Darkness. Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- HERFORD, C. H.; P. SIMPSON (eds.) (1925): *Ben Jonson: The Man and His Works*, 11 vols., Oxford, Clarendon.
- HERODOTUS (1954): *The Histories*, SALINCOURT, A. D. (trans.), New York, Penguin.
- JONES, E. D. (1971): *The Elizabethan Image of Africa*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia.
- JORDAN, W. D. (1968): *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- MACDONALD, J. G. (2002): *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- MARSH-LOCKETT, C. P. (1997): «*Pleasure Reconcild to Verture* in Historical Context» in HIRSH, J. (ed.) (1997): *New Perspectives on Ben Jonson*, Madison and London, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Associated University Presses. 154-164.
- MARTIN, M. R. (2001): *Between Theatre and Philosophy: Skepticism in the Major City Comedies of Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton*, London, Associated University Presses.
- MILES, R. (1986): *Ben Jonson: His Life and Work*, London and New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- RIGGS, D. (1989): *Ben Jonson: A Life*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

- STALLYBRASS, P.** (1988): «Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed» in **SNYDER, S.** (ed.) (1988): *Othello: Critical Essays*, New York, Garland. 251-277.
- TOKSON, E. H.** (1982): *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688*, London, G. K. Hall.
- WELSFORD, E.** (1927): *The Court Masque: A Study in the Relationship Between Poetry and the Revels*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.