The relationship between power and display in Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness*
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*The Masque of Blackness* is regarded as the first major court masque. It was written by Ben Jonson, with the collaborative input of Queen Anne of Denmark (wife of James I) and the designer, Inigo Jones, and performed at The Court of Whitehall in 1605 in front of King James and his courtiers. Stuart court masques were multi-media productions, which ‘grew out of earlier entertainments, mummmings, and disguisings’ (Lindley 1995, ix); they were largely performed by aristocratic ‘masquers’ and combined ‘songs, speech, richly ornamented costumes and masks, shifting scene panels … and intricate machines in which gods and goddesses descended from the heavens’ (Greenblatt et al. 2006, 1326). Significantly, they became a Renaissance symbol of wealth and power, partly because of their extravagance and the enormous costs involved in their production. It is argued that Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness* began a tradition of ‘prodigiously expensive masques: the queen’s bills for it came to around £5,000’ (Greenblatt et al. 2006, 1326). This was an extortionate sum of money to spend on a court celebration, which sent out a message to rival other Renaissance regimes, that the British monarchy had such funds available for mere entertainment (Orgel 1969, 2). In addition to this financial statement, the king’s power and authority is also in evidence in the content of *The Masque of Blackness* itself: through the concealing and revealing of identities, and in the portrayal of white supremacy over black ‘others’. Nonetheless, if *Blackness* appears to praise the power of the monarch, it also implies criticism of him; overall it strikes a balance between overt flattery of the king and covert criticism of him. For, as Lesley Mickel observes, it offers ‘subtle criticisms of royal policy’ and probes ‘the potential weaknesses of James’s monarchical discourse’ (1999, 45), leading to the view that the ‘dialectic impulse’ behind *Blackness*, ‘is directed at reforming the monarch and the court’ (Mickel 1999, 7).

Court masques were lavish, artistic entertainments, but the monarchs who assigned poets and playwrights to the task of creating them certainly did not intend them as mere ‘distractions from social, economic and political reality’, they were, as Richard Dutton rightly points out, ‘assertions of the court’s place within that reality’ (Dutton 2000, 6).
Their plots usually focused on and incorporated contemporary issues, thus bringing these to an audience’s attention. As Stephen Orgel explains, court masques were always ‘topical’ and during the later reign of Charles I they ‘argued the royal case in current political and legal disputes’ (Orgel 1991, 43), thereby defining the court as ‘the hub of power’ (Dutton 2000, 6). Even in its infancy, the court masque was a genre of political entertainment that idealized the Stuart court (Greenblatt et al. 2006, 1326) and The Masque of Blackness is an early example of this brand of entertainment. Like other masques that followed, it was a major political event because it provided an opportunity for the court to display itself ‘not only to itself, but also to foreign ambassadors and diplomats who eagerly sought invitation’ (Lindley 1995, ix). The self-reflective nature of the Stuart masque meant that, compared with other theatrical forms, it had, in the words of Graham Parry, ‘the greatest potential for political comment, for it was the supreme kind of court entertainment’ (1993, 87). Performances were exclusively for courtiers and royalty, ‘with leading members of the court circle taking on symbolic roles’ (Parry 1993, 87), and so creators of the masques knew their specific audience and could write their dramas accordingly.

It is not surprising, therefore, that a king or queen would want to be actively involved in the writing of masques. As head of state, he/she would appear responsible for the content of these internally reflective pieces. But, in presenting before such a select audience, an audience that invariably included foreign ambassadors and diplomats, writers would have to be mindful of whom they praised or might offend, and consider the possible reaction of certain individuals. Even so, The Masque of Blackness certainly asserts the cultural superiority of the English over non-Europeans, not least in the dramatist’s rejection of ‘Black Mauritania’ (North Africa), ‘Swarth Lusitania’ (Portugal) and ‘Rich Aquitania’ (Southwest France), in favour of ‘Albion the Fair’ (England) as the home of the omnipotent Sun King (James I) (Blackness, 98-105). Any Portuguese, French or non-European guest would find this patriotism rather offensive and even in much recent criticism, as David Lindley points out, ‘the masque is characteristically represented as nothing more nor less than the voice of sovereign power endlessly reduplicated’ (1995,
xv), which is a nationalist critique that supports the perception of white English supremacy as featured in *Blackness*.

As already observed, Queen Anne was actively involved in masque composition. A reader of *Blackness* learns very early in the text of her involvement. In Jonson’s introductory note to *Blackness*, he writes that ‘it was her Majesty’s will’ to have actors presented as ‘blackamoors’. But Queen Anne also performed in the drama, playing the part of Euphoris (a black daughter of Niger). It was usual for professional male actors to take the speaking roles and male members of the court were usually used for non-speaking parts or as dancers. However, ‘to the horror of English Puritans’ (Greenblatt et al. 2006, 1327), *The Masque of Blackness* featured women on stage – Queen Anne and other female courtiers who played the black, dancing nymphs. The significance of this can be interpreted in several different ways.

The Renaissance was a period in which it was not generally acceptable for women to personally express themselves through particular art forms. Although Queen Anne did not have a huge part in the writing of Jonson’s *Blackness*, some would still view her input as controversial. For the seventeenth century woman, even the act of writing was seen as ‘an inability to contain oneself within one’s proper bounds’ (Cerasano 1992, 216). A puritan reading of *Blackness* would perhaps view Anne as unable to contain herself as a woman should, in collaborating with Jonson to feature blackamoors in his work, and also by appearing on stage herself as one of them – Euphoris. Both these interventions could be seen as quite outspoken behaviour for a Renaissance woman, not to mention a Renaissance queen, which raises questions over the authority and kingship of Anne’s ruling husband, James I. They are a defiant display by Anne in a patriarchal society, a display that jeopardises King James’s reputation as the all-mighty and powerful king. Seventeenth-century courtiers were governed by complex and strict rules. It was acceptable for the king and queen to dance in masques ‘because dancing is the perquisite of every lady and gentleman’, however, actually playing a part in the masque ‘constitutes an impersonation, a lie, a denial of the true self’ (Orgel 1991, 39), which is definitely a step too far for an etiquette-obeying Renaissance queen and king.
But it is not just the behaviour of his queen that questions James’s authority and power. In *Blackness*, the daughters of Niger desire what they perceive to be real beauty, which is white skin and Neptune’s son, or the ‘Sun King’ (supposedly resembling King James), has the miraculous ability to turn black skin to white. Niger’s daughters therefore leave their native waters and come to the shores of England in search of the ‘Sun King’ and his skin transformations. In the final lines of the text (the point in the masque where concealed identities are revealed) Aethiopia explains:

> So that, this night, the year gone round,
> You do again salute this ground;
> And in the beams of yond’ bright sun
> Your faces dry, and all is done. (*Blackness*, 201-5).

Meaning that within a year Niger’s black daughters will have white skin and the Sun King will have technically fulfilled their wishes. However, this ending is highly problematic, because the masque does not include the removal of the disguise, hence, the spectator does not actually witness the black skins turned to white. The daughters, played by white actors, cannot uncover their blackness because they have had their faces painted black. Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson decided not to use masks as disguises, choosing body paint instead, rendering it virtually impossible for an unveiling to take place in front of the court audience.

On the surface, there is some kind of resolution in the verbal promise to Niger’s daughter’s that their skin will become white, that ‘Britannia … / Ruled by a sun …/ Whose beams shine day and night, are of force / To blanch an Ethiop’ (137-141), and they shall ‘perfection have’ after ‘the year gone round’ (315-6). Since kings are reputedly virtuous and trusted figures, there is no doubt that this is a genuine assurance. However, the fact that the character representing King James is unable to miraculously transform the skin colour of the daughters without delay, preys on the mind of the audience and reader. Hence, the credibility of the so-called ‘Sun King’, is undermined by ‘the fact that the promised transformation of the ladies’ skin is not staged’ (Greenblatt et al. 2006,
1326). Considering that Jones and Jonson went to such great lengths and spent such a vast sum of money in creating *The Masque of Blackness*, and that the very essence of the masque is the spectacle, why was this transformation not staged? On the one hand, the King is displayed as majestic for being able to alter skin colour, but on the other, the reality is that he is not able to perform this miracle in front of the court, and rather than his splendour being confirmed at the conclusion of the masque, it is his inabilities and failures that leave the final impression. Mickel shares this reading of *Blackness*, writing that ‘in praising and challenging the ruling elite’ the masque presents the court with an ‘idealised image’, imitating how far courtiers and the monarch ‘fall short of their ideal’ (Mickel 1999, 45).

The connection that Jonson’s masque makes between the King and the Sun shows a further potential weakness in James’s kingship. Comparing a monarch to the Sun is an appropriate conceit for the Renaissance age of new technology. Pioneering the use of newly invented telescopes, astronomers such as Nicolaus Copernicus formulated heliocentric cosmology, the theory that positions the Sun at the centre of the galaxy (not the earth at the centre as previously believed). This newfound knowledge that shifts the perspective of Sun is symbolised in the physical arrangement of the court. The masques were performed in front of the king, who sat in the Chair of State, which, like the location of the Sun in the sky, is centrally positioned in the ideal viewing position. The Sun and the king are both omnipotent entities that share attributes such as power and light. An interesting description that draws these likenesses together appears when the goddess Aethiopia instructs Niger, who is in need of guidance regarding his daughters:

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Invite them boldly to the shore,
Their beauties shall be scorched no more;
This sun is temperate, and refines
All things on which his radiance shines. (148-151)
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The abstract noun ‘radiance’ and the verb ‘shine’ are lexis predominantly related to the Sun, but the inclusion of the pronoun ‘his’ implies the personification of the ‘temperate’
Sun, mapping its features onto King James. As Stephen Orgel points out, it is ‘the relationship between the reality and the symbol, the impersonators and the impersonation, that is of crucial importance for the seventeenth-century spectator’ (1969, 5). The overall effect of Jonson’s masque therefore depends on whether a Renaissance spectator views Queen Anne as a black dancing nymph or as the King’s wife painted black, or interprets Neptune’s son as a mythological figure or a character modelled on King James. The Renaissance understanding of variation in skin colour was that the Sun ‘scorched’ ‘blackamoors’ to give them their darker complexion. So, by metaphorically associating King James with the Sun, some would assume that the impersonator is the sun, taking a literal view of Orgel’s ‘relationship between the reality and the symbol’. This reading would make James appear responsible for the ‘scorching’ of Niger’s daughters and creating their black skin in the first place. In promising beauty through white skin, King James’s white supremacist view actually serves as a self-contradiction because the ‘Sun King’ metaphor insinuates he gave the daughters their unbeautiful, black skin. Niger’s lengthy descriptions of his ‘beautiful’ daughters and their blackness extend the damage done to the integrity of the King:

Though he (the best judge, and most formal cause
Of all dames’ beauties) in their firm hues draws
Signs of his fervent’st love, and thereby shows
That in their black the perfect’st beauty grows,
Since the fixed color of their curlèd hair
(Which is the highest grace of dames most fair) (41-6).

Descriptions such as this add to the conflicting portrayal of the monarch in The Masque of Blackness. Niger says ‘in their black the perfect’st beauty grows’, a statement containing hyperbolic language and the superlative ‘perfect’st’ A father exclaiming how beautiful his daughters are is not uncommon, though a father who exclaims this and yet lets his daughters change the colour of their skin, is quite an inconsistency. It undermines the Sun King, who changes their skin from black to white, because Niger’s superlative suggests this is a fruitless act since they cannot be made any more beautiful.
Fracturing the portrayal of the monarchy is an unexpected feature of this masque. Outright praise and support of the monarch was very beneficial for writers and players alike, ‘a kind of investment … in their own futures’ (Lindley 1995, x). Although generally disliking the genre of the masque, writer Francis Bacon is claimed to have spent over £2,000 in providing the *Masque of Flowers* at the marriage of the Earl of Somerset to Frances Howard, a lavish gift made ‘entirely, so it would seem, to earn favour with the King’ (Lindley 1995, x). A better investment for Ben Jonson would have been a masque that portrayed King James as an absolute exemplary figure, since it is, as Orgel argues, ‘the image of the monarch that is crucial, the appearance of virtue, whether it accords with an inner reality or not’ (1991, 42). To achieve this ‘appearance of virtue’, Jonson should have flatly denounced black beauty and staged the king’s transformations of skin colour, thereby eradicating any criticisms of the monarch. However, Jonson is unlike Bacon in that he does not appear to be completely motivated by earning favour with the king. Orgel argues that for a Jacobean poet ‘the idealization of virtue embodied in the king was in the highest sense a moral act’ (1969, 2), so perhaps Jonson portrayed the monarch and the court as having flaws because that was less an ideal and closer to the truth and the reality.

The form and structure of Jonson’s masques developed during the seventeenth-century; they evolved to cope with the potentially dangerous and ambiguous presentations of the monarch and courtiers. He split his dramas into two sections, introducing a kind of prologue known as the antimasque, in which evil and wicked characters, played by professional actors, disrupted the harmony of the court. This left the masquers, played by courtiers, able to restore harmony and to glorify the situation created in the antimasque. However, overall *The Masque of Blackness* offers an interesting relationship between display and power. As an expensive, extravagant spectacle it displays incredible financial firepower and wealth. The text itself denotes international power, presenting England as the home of the Sun King, reinforcing the personal power and kingship of James I through his metaphorical connections with the Sun King, and subsequently creating ‘heroic roles for leaders in society’ (Orgel 1991, 38). But *Blackness* also appears to
undermine the power and virtue of King James, displaying, in turn, another kind of
power: the power of an audience’s interpretation. This is crucial because interpretations
of spectators and readers can differ greatly. The praise of black beauty by Niger and the
failure of the Sun King to visibly transform those black masquers to white before the
court, can be interpreted as flaws in King James and his court, succinctly described by
Lesley Mickel as the masque’s ‘fracturing tensions’ (1999, 26).

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