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Kristin McDermott

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“To blanch an Ethiop”: Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness* and Multicultural Approaches to Early Modern English Literature

Kristin McDermott

Before joining the faculty of Central Michigan University, I taught for eight years at Spelman College, a historically black college for women in Atlanta, Georgia. Teaching Early Modern English Literature (which encompasses both the Medieval period and the 16th-17th centuries in England) presented some exciting challenges in a setting whose mission included both Women’s Studies and an African-Diasporic approach to culture and history. Finding early literature that highlighted gender issues was easy; finding material that discussed race in terms comprehensible to the 20th century was much more difficult, as our modern conceptions and definitions of race owe more to 19th century cultural attitudes than to those of earlier periods.

My Shakespeare classes, of course, tackled *Othello* and *The Tempest*, both of which offer comprehensive interrogations of “otherness” as expressed in terms of skin color or physical difference. The *Merchant of Venice* also offered students a chance to explore a definition of race that was not dependent on skin color. But in my Renaissance Literature course, there was little opportunity to explore issues of race beyond the traditional privileging of “fairness” over “blackness” in lyric poetry’s neoplatonic definitions of beauty.

I finally decided that I owed it to my students to tackle a text that, though difficult, even obscure, in form and content, offered a unique opportunity to witness how the culture-makers of the 17th century envisioned the beginnings of the notion of African racial difference. Ben Jonson’s *The Masque*

of Blackness, even though one would assume it offered an important chance to explore one of the earliest treatments of race in English Literature, is not often studied in any but the most advanced classes, for obvious reasons. Briefly, a masque is a form of dramatic entertainment in which poetic praises of the monarch, the court, and their values are presented in a setting of music, dance, and elaborate scenery. Court masques, unlike other forms of drama, were performed only once (much like modern-day pageants, opening ceremonies, or halftime entertainments), were performed for an invited audience of aristocrats, were enormously expensive, and featured both professional actors as well as performances (usually dances) by members of the court. The masques of Ben Jonson were written and performed in the early 17th century for the court of King James I of England and his queen, Anna of Denmark. The “texts” of such masques, however, reveal little about their actual performance, even in the case of Jonson, who published his masque texts with extensive footnotes describing not only the scenery and action, but also his own scholarly sources for the complex classical allusions that informed his poems and song lyrics.

Still, the masque form is a valuable source of exploration of the relationship between art and power. A number of Jonson’s masques offer complex portraits of the tension between neoclassic decorum and more subversive poetic practices; they offer an opportunity to investigate the intensely interdisciplinary nature of

Renaissance art; and they often contain provocative statements about gender (or race or nationality) and power. This masque in particular offers a rare glimpse of early modern England's conception of Africa, enhancing the appearance, at least, of multiculturalism in a collection of "Dead White Male" literature that is often perceived as the antithesis of multicultural. It also offers the opportunity to present a little more straightforwardly the relationship between the masque and Stuart power.

The *Masque of Blackness* does have its drawbacks. Its plot is almost nonexistent; its poetry not the highest example of Jonson's capacity for mordant wit, even in the context of royal praise; its conception and execution are morally suspect from any enlightened 20th century point of view; and most of all, its ending is incomplete. Because the masque featured Queen Anne and her ladies in blackface makeup, the traditional unmasking of the courtiers that concluded each masque was impossible, necessitating the promise of a sequel in which the ladies would be transformed into their beauteous selves. This sequel, *The Masque of Beauty*, was not staged until three years later, and it is probably the least literarily interesting of Jonson's masques.

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These drawbacks affect only *Masque of Blackness*'s teachability, not its intrinsic scholarly value. This document has been of great interest in the last decade particularly, as early modern constructions of race and gender come under more frequent scrutiny. Kim Hall's "Sexual Politics and Cultural Identity in *The Masque of Blackness*" was

an influential study that was further fleshed out in her 1996 *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. She argues that any investigation of England's initial involvement in the triangular slave trade must include consideration of this esoteric expression of James' benevolent plans for a passive and needy Africa. Hall also suggests that such expressions of England's economic dominance are inseparable from constructions of female passivity and objectification as well. Such ideas are certainly not beyond the scope of undergraduate students when presented in a course that offers other examples of literature in the context of both poetic self-definition and of the power of patronage.

In the preface to her book, *Black London: Life Before Emancipation*, Gretchen Gerzina recalls inquiring at a London bookshop for Peter Fryer's well-known history of Black People in Britain and being told by the clerk, "Madam, there *were* no black people in England before 1945" (3). While Gerzina decries this fact as "a case of the present erasing the past," I became accustomed to teaching Renaissance Literature at Spelman to a population of upper-class scholars who were well versed in the history of African-Americans and of the African Diaspora by the time they came to my course, and who, even so, were often surprised to learn that there were black people in England before 1700. Their sole exposure to early modern English descriptions of Black figures before they take my course was usually Shakespeare's *Othello*; many also probably read a footnote noting that Elizabeth expelled blacks from England in 1599 and most probably assumed that they did not return until brought there as slaves or freedmen in the 18th century.

When they encountered Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* in each semester of Renaissance Literature, then, it sparked lively discussion of its presentations of "blackness" in the context of my students' ongoing investigations into the history of race and identity. Much of our class time on this text was heretofore devoted to understanding its literal meanings and to presenting general

information about the function of the masque in late Renaissance culture; for this reason, my students' responses focused more on the overtly disparaging references to the "blackness" of the Ethiopian nymphs than on the complex negotiations of aesthetic and historical myth presented in the masque. They were quick to express dissatisfaction with what Kim Hall calls the scholarly tendency to "remystify] the appearance of blackness in literary works by insisting that references to race are rooted in European aesthetic tradition rather than in any consciousness of racial difference" (*Things* 1). For this reason, I collected, from semester to semester, as many resources as I could to help my students explore both the historical contexts of the masque as an aesthetic artifact, and to locate contexts for their own complex reactions to this text.

Fully familiar with the tendency of European writers to "exoticize" black women, my students immediately understood Anne's desire to perform in blackface as a sexually subversive act. The identification of white with purity and black with corruption was depressingly familiar as well. Less familiar, however, was the model of heroic blackness on which Jonson draws to complete his portrait of the "black beauties" he casts as nymphs of the river Niger. While I resisted the urge to act as an apologist for Jonson, I did emphasize his attempts to create at least a temporarily positive model of blackness via the comments of the character Niger (the river god who was the father of the nymphs). While it was easy for them to dismiss Niger's praise of his daughters as the fond ravings of a biased parent, they were often surprised to hear that a model of black beauty did exist beyond the ironic one offered by Shakespeare's sonnets 127 and 130. And while it quickly became evident in the text that Jonson's efforts to define the nymphs as beautiful served his satiric swipe at "poor brain-sick men, styled poets" far more than it serves the defense of non-traditional beauties, the mere implication of an alternative to "fairness" made this a text worth looking at more carefully.

Providing Background

Therefore, I re-edited the text of the masque with an introduction designed specifically for the undergraduate student, and with expanded glosses of the text, hoping that the ready availability of this material would allow us to devote more class time to an understanding of the cultural and aesthetic issues in the text. This class had also been well prepared from the beginning of the semester to compare texts to fundamental classical (and mostly Neoplatonic) source materials, so I provided a detailed introduction explaining the theatrical and occasional functions of the masque and its literary antecedents. I also sought to convey the political and social complexities of the kind of discourse involved in occasional drama, so I drew upon Orgel and Hall to compose a brief analysis of the masque's constructions of race and gender. I glossed Jonson's highly allusive text extensively, modernizing spellings and offering background notes on the noble participants and the meanings of the emblems they carried on their costume fans. Fortunately, there are extant drawings by Inigo Jones of his costumes and some stage engines for this particular masque, allowing the instructor to give the students a specific idea of the physical nature of the performance. I offered short biographical sketches of the noble participants and explanations of the emblems they carried, and finally included Jonson's own footnotes at the end of the text, where they would be least intrusive but still available to the motivated scholar.

Response from students was positive, and I certainly felt that class discussion was enhanced when students came pre-prepared with these backgrounds. I had designed a combination of assignments around the edited text, including research, paraphrase and creative response, in order to help my students explore the many levels of cultural production and ideological significance contained in any masque and (for my students) particularly this one. The class assignment I envisioned for this text would ask the students to work individually and in groups, to create a three-tiered approach to the masque. Individually, they

would choose research topics that would answer many of their own questions about the art form, the political and social contexts, and the people involved in the original production. This aspect of the assignment would expect them to apply historical backgrounds directly to the text, in the form of a written report and of a footnote to the text.

Oral Presentations

The next step required the students to present their research orally, helping the class as a whole to achieve full comprehension of the masque as a cultural artifact. The final step I envisioned ideally as a continuance of the group exploration and as a collaborative effort that would approximately parallel the original composition parameters. During the time the students were preparing their research, I fortuitously ran across a lesser-known sonnet while preparing a subsequent lesson on women writers of the 17th century. Lady Mary Wroth's sonnet cycle, *Pamphilia to Amphilantus*, is frequently mentioned now in Renaissance courses, but her sonnet 22 is rarely anthologized. I first read it in Randall Martin's new Longman collection, *Women Writers in Renaissance England*:

Sonnet 22

Like to the Indians scorched with the sun,
The sun which they do as their god adore,
So am I used by love; for evermore
I worship him, less favors have I won. 4
Better are they who thus to blackness run,
And so can only whiteness' want deplore,
Than I, who pale and wan am with grief's store,
Nor can have hope but to see hopes undone. 8
Besides their sacrifice received in sight
Of their chose saint, mine his as worthless rite,
Grant me to see where I my offerings give,
Then let me wear the mark of Cupid's might 12
In heart, as they in skin of Phoebus' light,
Not ceasing offerings to love while I live.

Wroth was one of the noble participants in *The Masque of Blackness* and, although we cannot be sure of the date of this poem's composition, and

while some critics suggest that the images of separation and darkness allude to Wroth's fall from royal favor and her separation from the court, I ask my students to imagine these as the words of a woman who had portrayed one of the Daughters of Niger. In this context, my students were quick to point out the relatively deeper empathy and sensitivity of Wroth's use of the black/white metaphor in comparison to the masque's. The presence of this poem also helped them to imagine the noble participants as real persons capable of responding to the poet who wrote the words against which the women —living and white or imaginary and black — displayed themselves.

This poem provided a helpful transition to the point at which I asked my students to create their own responses to the masque. I had hoped to ask the class to create a plan for performing a version of *The Masque of Blackness* that would combine the original text with some revised textual materials and contemporary staging techniques adapted to the resources of a small class of non-drama majors. If the project evolved as planned, we could even perform the new masque for the other majors or even for the entire college.

Unfortunately, time did not permit so full a realization. Instead, I allowed the students to produce individual "creative responses" to the text, placing the focus on revising either the text or Jonson's descriptive passages. Some students approached their re-visions from the standpoint of theater history, suggesting an entertainment that would parallel the technologies and social function of the Jacobean masque. One student imagined an elaborate Esther Williams-style water pageant constructed in a beachfront stadium, describing the elaborate but water-resistant costumes of the Daughters of Niger. The action would take place both in and out of the water.

Another student, already familiar through her course in drama with current stage technologies, described the contemporary effects that would be needed to recreate the effects described by Jonson in his text edition of *The Masque of Blackness* — cycloramas for projections, audioanimatronic sea-

horses, optically distorted plexiglass to create underwater illusions, and Dolby surround-sound.

The most elaborately envisioned version was written by Ms. Becca Thompson, who created a Hollywood gossip column-account of Rosie O'Donnell's celebration of her son's third birthday . . .

A student who researched Ben Jonson's life and his complex relationship with royalty envisioned how the masque would be different if performed for Elizabeth rather than James. Among her perceptive suggestions: the Queen would not have herself performed in blackface before foreign dignitaries, and she would have encouraged but not demanded a bit less excess in the cost of the production. This student assumed that Elizabeth may have taken even more pleasure than James in being "represented as a source of beauty and light."

Another student, who had researched King James' political philosophy, approached the overtly political function of the masque by re-envisioning it as the primary entertainment at an Inaugural Ball for the President of the United States, optimistically designed, according to her "memo" detailing Rules and Procedures Governing the Masque of Inauguration, "to make the President appear perceptive and well-versed in academia and culture by appreciating the diversity of America and the world" Her parallel details included a racially, culturally, and artistically diverse lineup of performers whose "faces . . . range from the palest of white to the bluest black," and whose performances would "reaffir[m] the values of cultural, political and religious tolerance and democracy in the United States," while "praising [the] President . . . and the dominance of America." She noted at the end of her "memo" under the heading Important Symbols, "1) God and his Son, Jesus Christ, must be honored and appeased at the beginning of the ceremony; 2) The American flag

must be raised at full-staff; and 3) The President and First Lady must smile at all times."

The most elaborately envisioned version was written by Ms. Becca Thompson, who created a Hollywood gossip column-account of Rosie O'Donnell's celebration of her son's third birthday, for which "she revived a long forgotten form of theater, the court masque." Thompson envisioned a ballroom lined with rows of chairs rumored to be made especially for the event. Refreshments provided before the entertainment resulted in guests who were "feeling quite jovial (if you know what I mean)." Scandalous pre-show events included a "well-known movie producer (who shall remain anonymous) . . . escorting the young, beautiful (and very tipsy) star of his most recent movie into the second floor restroom for . . . shall we say . . . some pre-production festivities of their own." This detail parallels the Dudley Carleton anecdote provided in the student introduction in which, . . . one woman among the rest lost her honesty [sexual virtue], for which she was carried to the porter's lodge [after] being surprised at her business [in the act] on the top of the Terrace (10:449).

Thompson's entertainment, entitled *The Masque of the Littlest King*, in which "selected members from some of O'Donnell's favorite Broadway shows were members [of the] masque's cast," drew a parallel to James and Anne's function as arts patrons. Her references to *The Lion King* and *Bring in da Noise, Bring in da Funk* allude to the Jacobean practice of incorporating existing theatrical artisans and even set pieces into the masque form. Special effects in Thompson's masque included "dry ice, shooting laser beams, and blaring music."

Thompson set the budget for the O'Donnell masque at \$300,000, a close approximation (described in the student introduction) of the 1605 cost of *The Masque of Blackness*. The second act featured elaborately costumed skateboarders and in-line skaters ushering in the appearance of Jim Carrey, who harnessed his usually subversive film persona in order to narrate the story of "how all of the

animals in the jungle celebrated the day that Parker, the littlest King, was born." Thompson here created a parallel to the presence of the professional actors, normally associated with socially and artistically subversive performances, who "tamed" their normal performances to the service of praise in the court masque. The third act of Thompson's masque featured a musical performance by some of the celebrated guests, supported by professional musicians (in this case, the Spice Girls). Thompson comments that the quality of the guests' performance "left much to be desired," but that the point was not artistic integrity but "a good time."

Other students focused on the constructions of blackness in their creative reactions. One who researched examples of black presence in Jacobean court life imagined a soliloquy by Lucy Negro, a celebrated 17th-century courtesan. Drawing on the genre of slave narrative, she allowed Lucy Negro, imagined as a captured Ethiopian princess, to react to the impersonation of mythical Ethiopian nymphs on the masque stage with patient scorn. Alluding to literary rumors that Lucy Negro was Shakespeare's "Dark Lady," she imagined a liaison between the Bard and her narrator.

And another imagined a masque in which the black female performers danced with their bodies entirely covered, revealing only their own faces in "different shades of brown." She rejected the mask in the masque and instead imagined a performance in which the natural beauty of African-descended dancers' faces, instead of "a poor imitation," was framed in rich fabrics and jewels.

When race was brought into the modernizations, it functioned more usually as an expression of inclusion rather than of difference.

The bulk of my students' revisions, then, focused more on popular culture and on theatrical creativity than on the specifically racial implications of the text. When race was brought

into the modernizations, it functioned more usually as an expression of inclusion rather than of difference. Celebrities of all races mingle in equal levels of joy or smugness in these re-interpretations; "beauty" is uncritically celebrated for the most part. Their versions tended to reject the identification of blackness and whiteness with specific moral qualities, but their performance of this operation was more often implicit than explicit.

I am loath to place my students' reactions into the context of any particular pedagogical or sociological theories. Their own academic and cultural backgrounds were too diverse to allow easy categorization. Instead, I have tried as much as possible to describe the teaching of *The Masque of Blackness* as an ongoing process in which my own expectations and assumptions about this text were enriched and challenged by students who, to varying degrees, saw themselves in the "masks" of blackness assumed so blithely by Anne and her ladies.

Without my students at Spelman, I would never have been able to envision the project that is about to become *Masques of Difference*, a collection of Jonson's masques that I am editing for the University of Manchester Press as part of their Student Revels Editions series. This series is geared toward the advanced secondary and undergraduate student, offering extensively glossed versions of Early Modern dramatic texts, as well as introductory and supplementary materials that place the texts in cultural contexts of interest to contemporary students. *Masques of Difference* will present four of Jonson's masques that explicitly define the values of James' court in contrast to images of national, racial, and gender difference: *The Masque of Blackness* (race), *The Masque of Queens* (gender), *The Irish Masque* (nationality and race), and *The Masque of the Gypsies Metamorphosed* (language, race, and class).

Not surprisingly, my move to Central Michigan University has provided me with a student audience for this work as different (racially, geographically, and culturally) as possible from that of Spelman College. I'll be teaching *The Masque of*

Blackness from my edition in the Fall of 2002, in a new period survey course for English majors, Literature of Early Modern England. My ambitions for this text include allowing students to survey its performance history and critical heritage (much as I do *Othello* in my Shakespeare class), and to explore the possibility of creating a masque that similarly expresses their ideas about power, identity, and cultural production. Already, though, *The Masque of Blackness* has given me the opportunity to expand the Early Modern canon with a text and a cultural artifact that offers comparative opportunities stretching back to the whiteness of Una and the blackness of Stella's eyes, and forward to the maligned sensuality of the Duchess of Malfi and Milton's Eve. Jonson's nymphs may be masqued and voiceless, but my hope is that their presence will continue to inspire students to speak emphatically about — and to — the culture-makers of 17th century England, whose preoccupations about nationality, race, and power are still evident in our own time and place.

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About the Author

Kristin McDermott is an Assistant Professor of English at Central Michigan University. She teaches Shakespeare, Early Modern English Literature, and Drama.