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“ACTORS” IN “BARBARESQUE MANTELLS”.
THE BLACKNESS OF
THE FEMALE PERFORMERS
IN BEN JONSON’S *THE MASQUE OF BLACKNESS*

1

It seems that there is no real consensus whether the first English women on stage 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 women performing on public stages (Richards 1993, 1–5). However, just as performances at the court could have been influenced by popular drama, female performers of masques could also have had real theatrical interests, and it is possible to examine them in relation to stage acting.

In this paper I am going to discuss Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Blackness* focusing on the symbolism of blackness and its relation to the female performers. This masque, together with its sequel, *The Masque of Beauty*, had been interpreted by D. J. Gordon,¹ Stephen Orgel,² and others concerning their emblematic background and Neo-Platonic imagery, and it also has been proved that Jonson’s masques, especially their antimasque parts carry the characteristics of popular entertainments.³ What I would like to suggest is that blackness – beside its Neo-Platonic association to Darkness, Night, Death, etc. – and the performers being female, alien, and black have certain theatrical connotation as well, namely that their “black” condition in *Blackness* relate female masquers to popular (male) players. In other words, 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–17th centuries, it is important to note that I am mainly treating the masque as a theatrical phenomenon, and I am concentrating on *The Masque of Blackness* as a possible *mise en scène*. Moreover, in my argumentation, I am using Jonson’s later masque as a counterpoint to my main object of study, which is *The Masque of Blackness* since *The Masque of Beauty* seems to represent the “normal” condition of female Jonsonian masquers, that is non-blackness and beauty.

¹ D. J. Gordon, *The Renaissance Imagination* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 1975).

² Stephen Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge – Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965).

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

2

The masque, as Graham Parry explains, was primarily a political construct (Parry 1981, 89). Nevertheless, it was a theatrical genre, a spectacle as well. It used Greek and Roman mythology, well-known Renaissance topoi, and emblem books as well as the English folklore. Although performances were created in a way that the authors counted on the audience's foreknowledge and the classical courtly education, at the same time, they were prepared according to the requirements of the spectators just like plays on public stages. Still, apart from their topic, what made masques different from popular dramas, was on one hand, the function of the performance and the audience, and on the other hand, the emphasised role of choreography, dance, and symbolic scenic effects. The major spectator of the masque was the King, who did not only have the seat from which he could have the best view of the stage, but at the same time, he was also in the middle of the noble audiences' attention (Orgel 1975, 14). In other words, boundaries between stage and auditorium were erased, and the King was not only a part of the audience, but also the part of the spectacle (Wilson 2001). The auditorium and the arrangement of the seats were just as well-organised as the production itself.

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 (Parry 1993, 93).

Noble women on private stages could only be mute masquers. As *The Masque of Blackness* follows this decorum very properly, 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 masque, and it also involved the courtly audience. Speaking parts were most probably acted out by professional players, 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 professional actors, and it represented the world of misrule and grotesque disorder.⁴ It was followed by the 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 (Orgel 1970, 3). According to decorum, 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 of it, as I am going to discuss it in more details later, carry the characteristics of antimasque figures.⁵ Though they are mute, they are made very spectacular with the symbolic properties and the costumes designed by Inigo Jones.

Although before 1660–62, there are no actresses in English public theatres, theatregoers, antitheatrical writers, and dramatists had remarks on foreign female performers, and especially

⁴ 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 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*, 9–12, 14–17). 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 numbers in the case of masques refer to lines.

⁵ For more on the structure the court masques, see Orgel 1965.

puritan pamphlets attacked those “hog-faced women” from Italy and France that participated in plays and entertainments (Thomson 1996, 104). Though English theatre fans, actors, and dramatists – like e. g. 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 (Barish 1981, 92). While in Italy, women could play female parts on public stages, in England, the first (noble) women performers’ possibility to get on stage was 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.

3

As Jonas Barish argues, Jonson is an antitheatricalist in the sense that he treated players and spectacle with bias, and although he wrote for theatre in his whole life, he felt that the mutability of – both public and private – performance threatens his poetic universe (op. cit., 133–40). His deep suspicion toward 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 to make spectacles so as to compete with the play, and as for stagecraft, he was to a great extent against “painting and carpentry” (op. cit., 133). In his *Timber; or Discoveries*, for instance, he announces one of the 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 (Jonson 1947, 597).

Also, in his city comedies, role-playing and disguising usually have negative connotations.⁶ 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 antitheatricalism, and this ambiguous attitude towards theatre is detectable in his court masques as well (Barish 1981, 135–40).

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 us in the introduction to *The Masque of Blackness* (*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” (op. cit., 1–2). However, his later debate with Inigo Jones demonstrates that Jonson could never really reconcile himself to the fact that beside poetry, spectacle and acting are equally integral parts of the performance.

This 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. For Jonson, the poet-playwright, the masque was fundamentally about the verse, cha-

⁶ Cf. *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. More on Jonson’s antitheatricalism in his comedies is in Barish 1981, 147–53.

racter, and dialogue, while for Jones, the designer, it was about scenery and performance (Wilson 2001). This debate of playwrights and theatremakers – and / or scholars of drama and of performance – about the priority of drama or performance is, interestingly, one of the most hotly-debated issues ever since.

Although Jonson made the masque a literary genre, in fact, it was also 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 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. However, what Jonson in fact intends to do, especially with the long descriptive passages of stage actions, 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.⁷

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 *Hymenei* (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 (*Hymenei*, 1–9).⁸

Here, the “bodily part”, that is a metaphor of spectacle, theatre, or performance is told to be “short living” and “sensually preferred”, while the “soul” of the masque, that is poetry is lasting and “subjected to understanding”. Thus the body – both as spectacle and physical presence – in (private) theatre is, paradoxically, something that Jonson fights against. It 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.⁹ All this becomes even more interesting, when Jonson, in a mocking way, 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.¹⁰ Beside that this refers to the fact the Jones learned everything about theatre in Italy, what Jonson’s discriminating attitude recalls is antitheatrical writers on Italian theatremakers.¹¹

⁷ Unfortunately, we 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 (Parry 1981, 155).

⁸ All parenthesised references to *Hymenei* are from Stephen Orgel ed., *Ben Jonson: Selected Masques* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970).

⁹ “So / much for the bodily part, which was of Master Inigo Jones his design and / act” (*Blackness*, 72–4).

¹⁰ “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 1981, 145).

¹¹ About the debate of Jones and Jonson, in more details, see Parry 1981, 176–80.

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. 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. 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” (*Blackness*, 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 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” (*Blackness*, 225–6).

The idea of the discontentment with blackness could have come from the emblem called “Impossible” (“The Impossible”) from Alciato’s *Emblematum Liber (Book of Emblems)*. 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.”) (Alciato 1995). 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 – 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] blackmoors at first” (*Blackness*, 18).



Fig. 1. Emblemata LIX, “Impossible”. [Emblem 59, “The Impossible”.] Alciato, *Emblematum Liber [Book of Emblems]* (1621).

¹² Available: <<http://www.mun.ca/alciato/e059.html>> Access: 15 June 2003.

On one hand, being disguised as black people was popular in England at festivals during the preceding decade (Wynne-Davies 1992, 89), and on the other hand, black-moors in public plays – cf. *Titus Andronicus* or *Volpone* – were associated with the underworld; devils, beggars, gypsies, and other monstrous creatures, which were also synonyms of the “masterless men”, vagabonds, jugglers, and all kinds of public entertainers as well as common players (Newman 1991, 80–1).¹³ Moreover, it was a common Renaissance topos that black women are ugly (Hall 1994, 192). Thus, beside that she wanted to enhance the masque with exoticism, Queen Anne’s quite provocative idea to mask herself and her courtiers as black nymphs might be ascribed to her devotion to theatre and acting.¹⁴

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

“At night”, he writes, “we had the Queen’s Maske in the Banqueting-House, or rather her Pageant” (quoted in Orgel 1965, 4). 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 is not forgetful about the female performers. Above all, he finds it out of decorum that all their faces were painted black. There is no wonder that he was shocked, since this was the first recorded use of black paint as disguise – instead of masks, which was more common in courtly theatre.

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

In another letter, he even calls the Queen and her companion “Actors” “strangely attired in Barbaresque mantells” (ibid).

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 *Histrio-Mastix* was deprived of his ears and imprisoned more than twenty years later. Although it is not proved that with “Women-Actors, noto-

¹³ For more on ‘Egyptians’ in the 16th – 17th-century England, see Gâmini Salgãdo, *The Elizabethan Underworld* (Phoenix Mill – Thrupp – Stroud – Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1992), (Chapter 8, “Minions of the Moon”).

¹⁴ 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), available: <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/06-3/hagewrot.htm>,> access: 10 August 2002.

rious whores”, Prynne reflected to the Queen then, the statement was held to be a deep offence on the royal theatricals (Orgel 1975, 44).

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” (Orgel 1970, 3), because “a lady or gentleman participating in a masque remains a lady or gentleman” (Orgel 1975, 39). In fact, however, actors on public stages also remained *actors* who played parts. Instead, the crucial difference between royal and public players, might be that actors surely regarded themselves as actors, while there is no evidence what female masquers regarded themselves to be.

This question has also theoretical bearing, since, as Sandra Richards also expresses, 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 (Richards 1993, 3). All this brings forth the question of the definition of the actor in general, since what Orgel’s argument suggests is that acting is defined by transformation and character impersonation. However, one has to consider that there are several schools and methods of acting, and actor being an actor is not a question of the extent of submerging one’s personality into the role. The Brechtian actor works differently on stage than that following Stanislavsky. Moreover, one can talk about professionals and amateurs, as well as about players in

motion theatres and dance companies. It seems, thus, that being an actor is not dependent on the played character or the extent of “transformation”. Rather, actors are those that define themselves as actors and are interpreted by the spectators as such. This appears to be the case with Queen Anne and her companion if one considers the reactions 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. However – as Orgel also refers to this –, since *The Masque of Blackness* in fact represented the quality of blackness as disorder – just like Carleton observed and noticed –, it can be taken as an antimasque to *The Masque of Beauty*, in which the ultimate resolution comes. In this way, not only the black daughters of Niger con-

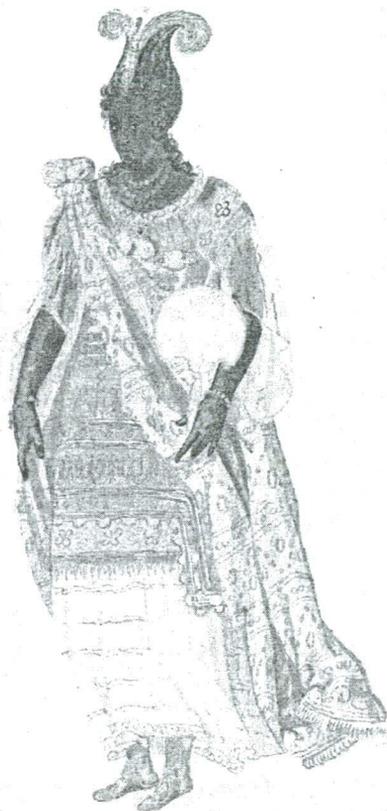


Fig. 2. A daughter of Niger from *The Masque of Blackness* (1605).

¹⁵ Available: <<http://virtual.park.uga.edu/%Ecdesmet/jonmasq/slide3.htm>> Access: 10 July 2003.

note the grotesque figures of the antimasque,¹⁶ but the royal performers can also be associated 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 “theatre” within the masque – is even more daring, because the symbolism of blackness, strangeness, ugliness, and acting overlap.¹⁷

The solution of the riddle of the antimasque gives way to the main masque. 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 (Orgel 1965, 128). In *The Masque of Beauty*, the nymphs are already non-black at their appearance. This change 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 acting. 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 (quoted in Janicka-Swidorska 1992, 78).

The essential scenic image of this masque is the “throne of beauty”.¹⁸ 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” (*Beauty*).

So Jonson, finally, washed the “Aethiop” white. The foreign black ladies associated with the antimasque, performance, and emphasised physicality were made white dancers of the main masque. In the more detailed description of the dances and the scenery, nevertheless, another act against theatre might be detectable. Jonson's intention to save performance in a literary form, however, is not really successful. In the case of the masque, readers of masques may agree, it is probably performance, which is more powerful.

¹⁶ 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)” (italics are mine). All parenthesised references are to Francis Bacon, *Bacon's Essays*, eds. F. Storr – C. H. Gibson (New York – Bombay: Longman, Green, and Co., 1898).

¹⁷ To give another characteristic example, one may recall that Mary Wroth was called a “Himnophradite in show, in deed a monster” by Sir Denny after she published her *Urania* (cf. Wynne-Davies 1992, 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 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 1991, 52).

¹⁸ All parenthesised references to *The Masque of Beauty* (hereafter *Beauty*) are from Clark J. Holloway ed., *The Masque of Beauty. Reprinted from the 1692 Folio*, available: <<http://www.hollowaypages.com/jonson1692beauty.htm>> access: 12 July 2003.



Fig. 3. Female masquer.

Beside that he followed the courtly decorum of the entertainments, the metamorphosis of the blacked “antimasquers” into non-black masquers represents very well Jonson’s vague and ambiguous relationship to theatre. Also, possibly, it cannot be accidental that this uncertainty is related to the female performers of the masques – whom we may or may not call the first English actresses – and who, for this reason, seems to have a quite unstable position in English Renaissance theatre history.

¹⁹ Available: <<http://virtual.park.oga.edu/%Ecdesmet/jonmasq/slide1.htm>> Access: 10 July 2003.

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