

Beyond the emblem: Alchemical Albedo in Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness*

Rafael Vélez Núñez

UNIVERSIDAD DE CÁDIZ

In 1977, A.C. Kelly completed the supposedly unfinished investigation that D.J. Gordon proposed in his 1943 study on the *Masque of Blackness*. The unresolved mysteries of the masque, its 'highly recondite' symbolism was left unexplained by the latter, who concluded that 'the scheme is thus a highly recondite one, and there is much in it which awaits fuller explanation.[GORDON: 127]

By placing emphasis on the light symbolism, Gordon encourages prospective criticism to rely on this theme 'as the key to its concerns and to its resolution.' [KELLY: 341] Water, the twin element that complements the emblem of the masque --and that has been apparently neglected in critical approaches so far--, becomes the central topic in Kelly's paper which, in order to clarify the enigmatic questions the masque elicits, demonstrates how both the water and light imagery interact[341]. She insists on the importance of water as a solution to the two main challenges to decorum raised by the performance: 1) maintaining the elevation of the court within the action and 2) translating them (masquers) to white again afterwards --in a second masque, *The Masque of Beauty*.'[KELLY: 343] Focusing on the water imagery, she shows the inherent independence of *Blackness*. In so doing, Kelly glosses over an emblem to elucidate the paradoxical meaning of the masque. Although she quotes Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems* as the source of the proverb 'It is as impossible as washing a black man white,[353]' Alciato's emblem No. LIX appears to be the more direct and accurate background for this iconological elaboration.

The interpretation of the problems presented by the masque are resolved as the King's challenge at the emblem, and his achievement to overcome any impossibility, namely, whitening Niger's daughters. The success of this interpretation, however, is not complete, since there are still many questions that demand solution or explanation. This paper aims to explain in different terms the unusually rich global imagery of *Blackness*, as well as the complex metaphorical emblem poised by it.

Since many of the masque's formal elements and symbolism --water, rivers, the Moon, the masquers' metamorphosis, colours white and black, the Sun-- resemble one of the Alchemical phases, the albedo, the intricate language of alchemy proves a useful means to unveil the meaningful obscurity of *The Masque of Blackness*.

Jonson's knowledge of alchemy is obvious from the use he made of it in at least two works, the comedy *The Alchemist* (1610), and the masque *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* (1615). As M. Butler indicates in his introduction to the play, the author's '...expertise was genuine, and he drew on many authorities: Arnold of Villanova, Geber, Paracelsus, Robertus Vallensis, Sendivogius and Martin del Rio, besides a German collection of treatises *De Alchemia* (1541) and English writings by George Ripley and Roger Bacon.' [BUTLER: 3]

Concerned, as Jonson explained in *Hymenaei*, with the 'soul' of the masque, the 'inward parts, and those grounded upon antiquity and solid learnings,' the author could easily indulge in his sound knowledge of this philosophical science.

I

Alchemy, according to Fabricius, is ‘the art of transmuting base metals into silver or gold by freeing the crude materials from their “impurities”.’[7] The transformation or transmuting of the metals should be achieved after a long, difficult and enigmatic process, the so-called ‘alchemical opus.’ The opus is divided into four stages: ‘the earthy *nigredo*, or “blackening” stage, represented by a little inky man; the watery *albedo*, or “whitening” stage, represented by a white rose; the airy *citrinitas*, or “yellowing” stage, represented by an eagle winging toward the sun; (and) the fiery *rubedo*, or “reddening” stage, represented by the glowing lion.’[FABRICIUS: 14]

To achieve the philosophical stone or red elixir, the goldmakers experimented with the *prima materia*, which underwent the following processes common to all alchemical treatises:

- (a) breaking down or purification
- (b) the preparation or treatment of the resultant material thus purified or reduced, which was usually conceived of as separation then joining together, alternations between ‘body’ and ‘spirit’ or the ‘fixed’ and the ‘volatile,’ or numerous repetitions of any or all of these
- (c) the production of the white elixir which would transmute metals into silver
- (d) the production of the red elixir which would transmute metals to gold
- (e) augmentation of the potency of the red elixir
- (f) projection or transmutation, when the medicine was applied to imperfect metals instantly transforming them to gold.[ROBERTS: 57]

There was also consensus on the symbolic colours that were related to each stage, as Roberts puts it:

‘The first stage was signalled by black, and white and red obviously corresponded with the production of those elixirs. There was some agreement that all processes up to the production of the red elixir should take place in a glass vessel which would show the colour stages and which should be literally hermetically sealed and not opened until the red stage was achieved, fixed and invariable. The matter in the vessel was then put through various processes signalled by colour changes. Moderate heat, ‘an easy fire’, imitating the temperate and gradual processes of nature, was thought appropriate to reach the white stage.’[ROBERTS: 57]

II

Two of the formal elements of the masque, i.e. the language and the iconography, serve as the main vehicles through which the alchemical opus is translated into the work. The following study will, for practical purposes, treat them separately, even if they form a unity in the performance.

The scarce speeches of the masque which, as is customary to the form, lack dialogical exchange and dramatic value, show a number of rhetorical figures familiar to the language of alchemy. A secret practice, alchemy needed a special code to deter unwelcome adepts from reaching the hidden knowledge; the alchemists consequently wrote in a deliberately obscure style that relied heavily on allegory, narratives, riddles, paradoxes and metaphors to preserve the secrecy of alchemical science.

The degree of linguistic difficulty and the problems found in the interpretation of this masque are enhanced by parts of speech that resemble, because of their lack of reference in the text, the high and symbolic discourse of alchemy. Examples of this use of language are found throughout the whole work. Oceanus’s, Niger’s and Ethiopia’s speeches, the only speaking characters in the entertainment, address the audience with a peculiar discourse close to paradox and mystery.

Oceanus’s opening intervention finishes with the verse ‘*This squarèd circle of celestial bodies.* (l. 100)’ This apparently paradoxical statement appears after the discussion of another recurrent topic in the masque, the idea of mixture, the basic principle upon which alchemical transformation depends: ‘*Mix thy fresh billow with my brackish stream.*’ (97) Here two waters are mixed, sweet and brackish. Albertus Magnus considered that salt is ‘*the key to the art, opens and closes all things and no*

alchemical work can be completed without it [ROBERTS: 111]. Mixing is, then, the first stage in the process, the fundamental basis of the opus, in which elements are added in a specific order. The alchemical reading of these verses, however, might be further developed when connected to the 'squaring of the circle.' This geometrical operation, common to architecture, is described by Maier as follows: 'Make a circle out of a man and woman, derive from it a square, and from the square a triangle: make a circle and you will have the philosophers' stone.' [FABRICIUS: 198; SEBASTIAN: 143] The representation of the philosopher's stone (final stage) at the beginning of the masque, when the first steps of the process are being taken, announces in an almost prophetic way the forthcoming metamorphosis. Oceanus functions as an omniscient character, an alchemist himself, familiar with the beginning and the end of alchemical opus, and uses a language suitable to his knowledge.

The second character involved in the dialogue is Niger, the river-father of the Ethiopians. Jonson's sources are always authoritative, as he shows in the introductory notes to the masque, where he uses 'Pliny, Solinus, Ptolemy, and of late Leo the African.' But these sources erroneously place the river Niger in Ethiopia; and misled by this wrong geographical assumption Jonson writes: '(they) remember unto us a river in Ethiopia famous by the name of Niger, of which the people were called Nigritae, now Negroes, and are the blackest nation of the world.' The Queen's desire to have 'blackamoors' at first, was satisfied by the author with the inclusion of Niger and his daughters in the antimasque. Jonson resolves the contemporary terminological confusion between Ethiopians, Nigritae, Negroes, Blackamoors and Moors, by simplifying it. The free use of terms depicting a black person extends to the language of alchemy as well. Both in *Splendor solis* and in an anonymous set of alchemical medals, the Albedo and Nigredo are allegorically explained using black people -- called 'moors' or 'Ethiopians'-- who are described as 'alchemical symbol (s) of uncleanness and baseness.' [FABRICIUS: 94]

The first medal shows the ablution of the black body of the Moor, or Ethiopian. He appears in his half-washed state with a miniature sun and moon burning in the candles inside his transparent body. The inscription reads: We have removed the blackness with salt, anatron and almizadir, and we have fixed the whiteness with borrezae.' Nigredinem abstulimus cum sale Anatro et Almizadir, albedinem fiximus Borrezae. [FABRICIUS: 116]

In this way, the apparently wrong determination to use Ethiopians, instead of the more general blackamoors (as the Queen commanded) in his masque, could echo Jonson's alchemical background.

Niger, as a river, fits the watery emblem of the entertainment, but, when connected with the Ethiopians, he recalls alchemy again. In another of the medals mentioned above, the inscription reads: 'Quae tibi causa fuit vitae, ipsa quoque fuit causa mortis' (That which was the cause of thy life is also the cause of thy death) [FABRICIUS: 115]. The text encircles a picture depicting how the 'son is killed and dismembered by his father, whom the alchemists compare to Saturn or the spiritus Niger.'

The cruel parricide shown in the medal fulfils the common and extravagantly allegorical aesthetics of alchemy. As symbols, the 'spiritus niger' and his dismembered son can be translated as the river Niger and his Ethiopian daughters in the masque. The father is not aware of his daughters' suffering; but he must irremediably provoke it, because he is by nature black. The daughters' desire to be white is not shared by Niger, who is convinced of black beauty: 'the Ethiops were/ As fair as other dames.' (139-40) His search is encouraged by the grieving girls only: 'now black with black despair ...fear and care possessed them whole; ...They wept such ceaseless tears into my stream.' (140-46) According to his discourse, Niger wants to remain in the Nigredo, since being black, he defends, is not pernicious for the Ethiopians. But, in its alchemical framework, blackness is just a stage that must necessarily continue, as the girls' zeal for change shows. In his doubt about the quality and beauty of blackness, Niger hurts his daughters --in a way similar to the medal--. However, upon their arrival in Britannia, Niger's attitude seems to change and the following step, Albedo, begins.

The riddle magically reflected on the surface of the river, that helps Niger and his daughters to reach England, also resembles alchemical discourse in the hidden meaning of its words and the difficulty in deciphering its instructions.

That they a land must forthwith seek,
 Whose termination (of the Greek)
 Sounds *-tania*; where bright Sol, that heat
 Their bloods, doth never rise or set,
 But in his journey passeth by,
 And leaves that climate of the sky
 To comfort of a greater light,
 Who forms all beauty with his sight. [164-171]

Ethiopia, the Moon's name in the masque, is undoubtedly the most alchemically involved character. She appears and disappears, gives instructions and, even more than Oceanus, leads the ceremonies and dances, the rites which, as will be stated below, constitute actual alchemical experiments. Her speech is the most relevant in the whole work. Putting aside the usual sycophantic praises, the Moon's discourse defines the process of Albedo:

Ruled by a sun, that to this height doth grace it.
 Whose beams shine day and night, and are of force
 To blanch an Ethiop and revive a cor'se.
 His light sciential is and (past mere nature)
 Can salve the rude defects of every creature.' [224-28]

James symbolizes the sun; this star provides light, but also heat, an eternal heat that can cure and transform. Alchemical stages need heat to be successful, and that is exactly what they get from the king:

Fire is the fuel of the alchemical work and the main agent of its continuous process of transmutation. Once kindled, the alchemist's fire is maintained until the end of the Great Work.' [FABRICIUS: 14]

The recipe for the metamorphoses is given by Ethiopia again, whose final speech details the steps for the transformation. She calls them 'rites' and, recalling those dark treatises, she proceeds:

Thirteen times thrice, on thirteen nights
 (So often as I fill my sphere
 With glorious light, throughout the year)
 You shall, when all things else do sleep
 Save your chaste thoughts, with reverence steep
 Your bodies in that purer brine
 And wholesome dew, called rosemarine;
 Then with that soft and gentler foam,
 Of which the ocean yet yields some,
 Wherof bright Venus, beauty's queen,
 is said to have begotten been,
 You shall your gentler limbs o'er-lave,
 And for your pains, perfection have.
 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.[303-18]

Although the king must be appointed as the only promoter of the Ethiopians' whitening, the Moon's role shouldn't be discarded. In alchemical terms, the Albedo requires both stars to succeed, hence the predominant function of Ethiopia in the entertainment: 'In albedo the *virgin* and the *moon* appear as the great alchemical symbols of sublimation.' [FABRICIUS: 111] To achieve the Philosophers' stone, Sol and Luna (allegorically depicted as father and mother) are the symbols of the generation of the alchemical opus. In the masque, Jonson gives similar importance to both characters. Of course, James's power and transcendence prevails.

Ethiopia's speech shows the characteristic instructions of alchemy: repetition of the process 'thirteen times thrice..you shall o'er-lave'; the pureness and chastity of prima materia, embodied in the Ethiopians; and, finally, another essential element, dew. Perhaps because he feels compelled to adjust to the watery invention of the performance, the author uses rosemarine, or sea dew. More closely related to the occasion, he might have made use of the common 'heavenly dew' of alchemy, as he describes in Glycyte's and Malacia's fan. This substance is also called the 'eye-water of the philosophers' (collyrium philosophorum), or aqua sapientiae ('water of wisdom') [FABRICIUS: 117]. This water or dew has germination power, and is needed in whatever process of de-albation is undergone. Together with a continuous and temperate fire dew can 'turn every black thing white and every white thing red. So, as water bleaches, fire gives off light and also colour to the subtilized earth, which appears alike a ruby through the tingeing spirit she receives from the force of the fire.' [FABRICIUS: 114]

The misunderstood iconological apparatus of the masque, the second factor in this analysis, stands independently in the performance. The fans displayed by the masquers, in which their mixed names and mute hieroglyphics were inscribed, seem to be the central imagery of Blackness. Except for the first and last, the other four hieroglyphics have been described as referring to each of the four elements. Their function and meaning in the dramatization, however, remain unexplained. Gordon does not explain them successfully and Kelly simply does not consider them in her study. Jonson provides the following description:

THE NAMES *THE SYMBOLS*

Euphoris, Aglaia *A golden tree, laden with fruit*
 Diaphane, Eucampse *The figure icosahedron of crystal*
 Ocyte, Kathare *A pair of naked feet in a river*
 Notis, Psychtote *The salamander simple*
 Glycyte, Malacia *A cloud full of rain dropping*
 Baryte, Periphere *An urn, sphered with wine*

Lindley disdains as old fashioned any attempt at studying iconology, which is why his new edition of this masque simply summarizes the names and their inherent symbols, without paying any heed to their meanings or symbolism:

The Names: the meanings of the names in order are: abundance, splendour, transparent, flexibility, swiftness, spotless, moisture, coldness, sweetness, delicacy, weight, revolving (circular). The symbols, in order, refer to fertility, a twenty-sided figure standing for water, purity, the salamander not harmed by fire, education, the globe of the earth. [LINDLEY: 218]

Gordon attempts to explain and understand the function and related symbolism of these names and hieroglyphics, but he can only show his own unresolved hypotheses. Again alchemy throws light over these problems. Gordon's interpretation of four of the pairs seems valid for our analysis. The isocaedron stands for water, the salamander for fire, the cloud for air and the feet in the river for purification. Gordon quotes Horus Apollo, and interprets the last emblem as 'the fuller' [126]. In the Spanish edition of Horus Apollo, there are several hieroglyphics the illustrations of which depict feet in water. Mixing them both we get: 1) land or earth: 'para indicar "batanero", pintan dos pies de hombre en el agua, y representan esto por la semejanza con el trabajo' [HORAPOLO: 233]; 2) and, surprisingly, the impossible again: 'Para significar "imposible que suceda" pintan unos pies de hombre paseándose por el agua.' [HORAPOLO: 231]

The most complicated interpretation, however, comes from the last pair. Gordon defends that they stand for earth, although he makes reference to the O.E.D. as well, where a different reading appears: 'The O.E.D. interprets Jonson's phrase to mean an urn filled with wine.' [GORDON: 126] Considered less convincing, this possibility is rejected. But, from an alchemical reading of the masque, the vessel full of wine refers to the rubedo, the last stage in which the prima materia becomes red: 'finally a deep red appearing in the glass vessel in which the Stone was made' [ROBERTS: 55].

The golden tree recalls the 'philosopher's tree,' which is connected with creation and generation. It is the predominant symbol in the group for several reasons: it is the first in order and was carried by the queen herself. The idea of fertility fitted the pregnant queen who in this way symbolizes the eternal fountain of monarchy.

Recondite is the adjective that best qualifies the symbolical mechanism of the masque. Alchemy supplies the key to connect the so far isolated symbols lacking contextual meaning. The four elements (depicted in each of the hieroglyphics), constituents of the base metal, are ready to be transformed with the help of the Moon and the heat of the Sun. The tree initiates the process of generation and its success is shown in the red vessel, herald of the last stage. The de-albation thus supposes an act of purification of the black, impure body of the Ethiopians. In this context Jonson presents James I as a magnificent alchemist who is able to transform the impossible with his 'alchemical' knowledge and wisdom.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alciato. 1985: *Emblemas*, Madrid, Akal.
- Butler, M. ed. 1989: *The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson*, vol. 2, Cambridge, C.U.P.
- Cirlot, J. E. 1979: *Diccionario de símbolos*. Barcelona, Labor.
- Duncan, E. H. 1942: The Alchemy in Jonson's *Mercury Vindicated*. *Studies in Philology* XXXIX: 625-37.
- Fabricius, J. 1994: *Alchemy: The Medieval Alchemists and their Royal Art*. London: Diamond Books.
- Gilbert, A. H. 1948: *The Symbolic Persons in the Masques of Ben Jonson*. Durham, N.C., Duke University Press.
- Gordon, D. J. 1943: The Imagery of Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* and *The Masque of Beauty*. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* VI: 122-141.
- Horapollo 1991: *Hieroglyphica*. Madrid, Akal.
- Johnson, A. W. 1994: *Ben Jonson: Poetry and Architecture*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Kelly, A. C. 1977: The Challenge of the Impossible: Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness*. *College Language Association Journal* 20: 341-55.
- Klossowski de Rola, S. 1993: *Alquimia: el arte secreto*. Madrid, Debate.
- Lindley, D. ed. 1995: *Court Masques*. Oxford, O.U.P.
- Morley, H. 1890: *Ben Jonson, Masques and Entertainments*. London, Routledge and Sons.
- Orgel, S. 1970: *Ben Jonson: Selected Masques*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Roberts, G. 1994: *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books*. London, The British Library.
- Sebastián, S. 1989: *Alquimia y Emblemática. La fuga de Atalanta de Michael Maier*. Madrid, Ediciones Tuero.

* * *