

The Poetical Mind in Ben Jonson's Masques

Rafael Vélez Núñez

UNIVERSIDAD DE CÁDIZ

rafael.velez@uca.es

The existence of hieroglyphics, able to imitate the intelligible world and therefore bearers of that unique reality, helps Jonson to place his position regarding the quarrel between body and soul. The poet gives the masque a hieroglyphical value; he creates it as a multiple symbol revealing an absolute truth, which cannot be comprehended by the whole audience. This truth inhabits the intelligible world and, like the soul itself, is eternal. Although Jonson makes use of emblematic syntax in the composition of the iconographical apparatus in his masques, the limits imposed by iconology are far too restrictive for the application and working of his poetics.

Despite his debt to humanism, the poet sublimates its precepts in order to create his own theory. The masque stands for a mimetic mirror of the virtuous court and serves as a model for the courtiers. The reality reflected in the performance, however, differs from that perceived by the senses, and that's the reason why Jonson adds a new element to the existing theory. In the famous poem against Inigo Jones, *Expostulation*, Jonson defines the masque as a "court hieroglyphic".

O shows! Shows! Mighty shows!
The eloquence of masques! What need of prose,
Or verse, or sense, to express immortal you?
You are the spectacles of state! 'Tis true
Court hieroglyphics, and all arts afford
In the mere perspective of an inch-board.
(ll. 39-44; Donaldson 1985: 462)

The poet repeats the same term in *Blackness*, where he explains the exact reason of the inclusion of hieroglyphics in the entertainment:

Here the tritons sounded, and they danced on shore, every couple as they advanced severally presenting their fans, in one of which were inscribed their mixed names, in the other a mute hieroglyphic, expressing their mixed qualities. Which manner of symbol I rather chose than imprese, as well for strangeness, as relishing of antiquity, and more applying to that original doctrine of sculpture which the Egyptians are said first to have brought from the Ethiopians. (ll. 237-243; Lindley 1995: 7)

As it is collected from here, Jonson prefers the “hieroglyphic” to the “imprese” because of its evocative quality and deep symbolism. Strangeness, erudition and antiquity are common accidents which distinguish hieroglyphics from emblems and impreses. In *Expostulation*, this term seems to share the same meaning. “Court hieroglyphic” embodies the universalization of symbolism, so that the whole court acquires a representative and symbolic character.

Liselotte Dieckmann initiated this discussion a few years ago and she was the first one to connect Jonson’s courtly works with the Neoplatonic theory of the hieroglyphic.

Hieroglyphics were, around 1600, the common ground on which art and poetry met. They served not only both arts, but also the various combinations of these two art forms. An outstanding example is Ben Jonson’s masques, where pictorial and literary representations were joined with architecture, music, and dancing. The artistic purpose of such a rich pageantry was to set all sense organs of the audience into play and to make appear, through and beyond these sense impressions, the intellectual significance and the true philosophical meaning of the whole. Ben Jonson himself once called the masque a “court-hieroglyphic”. (Dieckmann 1957: 134)

An important aspect of Neoplatonism can be collected from this quotation: the purpose of pageantry to define “the intellectual significance and the true philosophical meaning of the whole”. The philosophical meaning of the whole constitutes one of the basic premises for the study of Jonson’s hieroglyphics.

In some of his poems, Jonson created a literary mechanism which displayed his poetical theory based on the distinction between body and soul. Within the comprehending system of reality, the mind, identifiable with the soul, is the real motor in the understanding and codification process of the symbolic message. The senses capture the corporeal reality but fail to understand it fully. It is the mind which captures, codifies and understands the symbolism of images.

“The Mind of the Frontispiece to a Book” is an explicatory poem that Jonson wrote for the frontispiece of Sir Walter Raleigh’s *The History of the World* (see Figure 1).

From death and oblivion (near the same)
The mistress of man’s life, grave history,
Raising the world to good or evil fame
Doth vindicate it to eternity.
Wise providence would so, that nor the good 5
Might be defrauded, nor the great secured,
But both might know their ways were understood,
When vice alike in time with virtue dured.
Which makes that, lighted by the beamy hand
Of truth that searcheth the most [hidden] springs, 10
And guided by experience, whose straight wand
Doth mete, whose line doth sound the depth of things,
She cheerfully supporteth what she rears,
Assisted by no strengths but are her own;
Some note of which each varied pillar bears; 15
By which, as proper titles, she is known
Time’s witness, herald of antiquity,
The light of truth, and life of memory.
(Donaldson 1985: 344)

The very title of this poem is rather significant. The poet helps the reader achieve the function which his/her own intellect should carry out when facing the iconographical programme offered by this frontispiece. The semantic and symbolic connection generated between the poem and the frontispiece is similar to that between the text of the masque and the stagecraft. Thus, the poem functions as the translation of the visual body, perceptible by the senses, to a specific code which the mind can understand. This mechanism makes the explanation of the real sense of the images –which remain isolated on the static page– possible. All these allegories and personifications that make up the frontispiece are not “mute hieroglyphics”, since each of them is accompanied by its name. Nevertheless, the iconographical programme requires the explanation of this emblematic syntax; and this is what Jonson offers with this poem.

This symbiosis could be applied to masques. Movement is the only difference between the body of the frontispiece and that of the masque scenery. Whereas the overall iconographical programme is perceived simultaneously and instantaneously from the page, the “masque-in-performance” presents a consecutive syntax, which needs a time interval to develop its complete symbolical message.

The complexity of these hieroglyphics is achieved by the concentration of certain symbolic elements in the performance. Some symbols offer a revelation which Gombrich considers is not just a matter of identification of an idea or human virtue. This revelation borders the limits between the real and intelligible worlds. It involves common and known experiences and some others to which only a few people have access. The revelation implies a mental action, because its plenitude of meanings cannot be learned, but must be found in the very process of contemplation it is designed to engender (1948: 159). The obscurantism of some Jonsonian masques, clear indicators of the poet's interest in erudition and knowledge, recalls this attitude. The prologue to *Hymenaei* repeats this Platonic desire to feed the soul, not the senses:

And howsoever some may squeamishly cry out that all endeavour of learning, and sharpness in these transitory devices especially, where it steps beyond their little or (let me not wrong 'em) no brain at all, is superfluous, I am contented these fastidious stomachs should leave my full tables and enjoy at home their clean and empty trenchers, fittest for such airy tastes; where perhaps a few Italian herbs picked up and made into salad may find sweeter acceptance than all the most nourishing and sound meats in the world. (Lindley 1995: 10)

This model seems to satisfy the interpretative needs of the masque as a complex moving symbol. An overall analysis must pay attention to all the components in the performance, in which various senses are involved. Apart from the eyes, perceivers of images, another fundamental sense is the ear. Every entertainment depended on dances and music adorned with rich dress, jewelry and impressive machinery, which ravished the senses and passions. Poetry, transformed into language, captivates the mind and concentrates the isolated sensual elements in a single symbol.

The perception of the masque symbolism, like that of any other image, constitutes one of the moments in the creation of the symbol. The theatrical action is built by both Jonson and Jones. In this way, not only the body, but also the soul is related to one *Idea*. The masque body is a reflection of the court's corporeal level, and Jonson's text exposes a mind and an immortal soul, that of the king. The poet exploits the capacity for identification between the court and the perfect intelligible world. The court is an *idea*, the king its absolute creator, and the masque, the archetypal representation, unique and perfect, of that *idea*. Hence the didactic character of the entertainment. Though this stands for an obvious reality, the evidence reflected in the symbolic mirror of the performance could hardly refer to the court itself. This is the case of some masques in which Jonson introduces subtle criticism of the far from exemplary courtly behaviour.

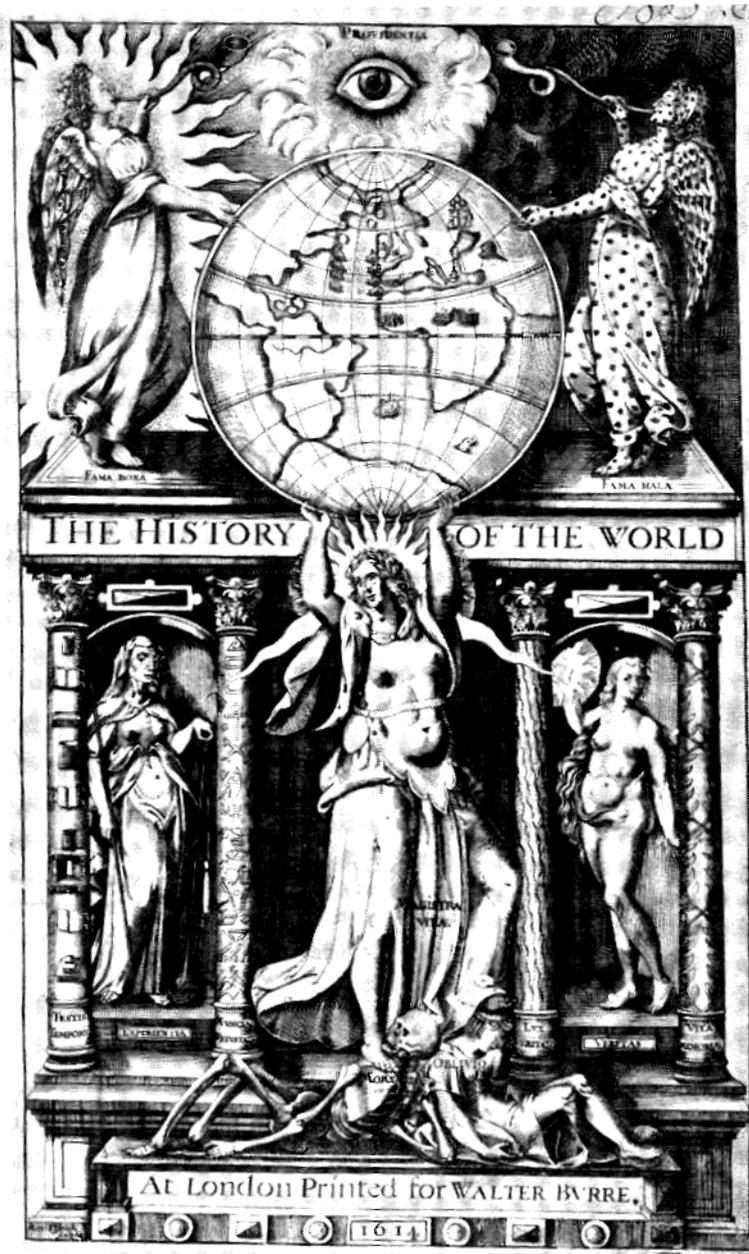


FIGURE 1. Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* (London, Walter Burre, 1614). Frontispiece engraved by Renold Elstracke. Reproduced from Donaldson (1985: 345).

In this way, several levels of perception can be found: the way Ben Jonson sees the court, how he represents it and, finally, the way the court perceives itself in reality and in the fiction of the masque. However, being aware of the King's and court's lack of virtues, the poet depicts them in an Aristotelian fashion, namely, not the way they are, but the way he thinks they should be. The language used by the poet identifies the court with an iconographical programme: how the monarch, the queen, and all the courtiers occupy their positions in the representation of virtue. The court receives a message of magnificence, of the political power it possesses and which they want to share with the foreign ambassadors.

Our knowledge of courtly life reveals however its components' unworthy and excessively worldly character. Jonson knew the corruption, intrigues and even murders that took place at Whitehall, but he had to continue his humanist labour and to try to convince the court to behave in a way fitting its social and political status.

REFERENCES

- Allen, D. Cameron 1939: Ben Jonson and the Hieroglyphics. *Philological Quarterly* 8: 291-300.
- Clements, R. J. 1960: *Picta Poesis: Literary and Humanistic Theory in Renaissance Emblem Books*. Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura.
- Dieckmann, L. 1957: Renaissance Hieroglyphics. *Comparative Literature* 9: 308-21.
- Donaldson, I., ed. 1985: *Ben Jonson*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Dutton, R. 1983: *Ben Jonson*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Finkelstein, R. 1987: Ben Jonson on Spectacle. *Comparative Drama* 21.2: 103-14.
- Gilbert, A. H. 1948: *The Symbolic Persons in the Masques of Ben Jonson*. Durham (N. C.), Duke University Press.
- Gombrich, E. H. 1948: Icones Symbolicae. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 9: 211-92.
- Gombrich, E. H. 1993: *Symbolic Images*. London, Phaidon Press.
- Gordon, D. J. 1949: Poet and Architect: the Intellectual Setting of the Quarrel. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 12: 152-178.
- Herford, C. H., Simpson, P. and Simpson, E., eds: 1952: *Ben Jonson*. 11 vols. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Lee, R. W. 1982: *Ut pictura poesis: la teoría renacentista de la pintura*. Madrid, Cátedra.
- Lindley, D., ed. 1995: *Court Masques*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Murphy, J. J., ed. 1983: *Renaissance Eloquence. Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric*. Berkeley, Cal., University of California Press.
- Platón 1991: *La república o el estado*. Madrid, Espasa Calpe.

- Platz, N. H. 1973: Ben Jonson's *Ars poetica*: An Interpretation of *Poetaster* in its Historical Context. *Salzburg Studies in English Literature. Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies*, 12. Salzburg, Institut für englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg. 1-42.
- Plett, H. F. 1983: The Place and Function of Style in Renaissance Poetics. > Murphy, J. J., ed. 1983: 356-374.
- Puttenham, G. 1970: *The Arte of English Poesie*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Raleigh, Walter, Sir 1614: *The History of the World*. London, Walter Burre.

* * *