wicked, disruptive, or music characters played by professional actors invade the court, only to be banished by the aristocratic masques whose dancing transforms the court into a golden world. They then enact the mixture of the ideal and the real as they unmask, revealing themselves as court personages, and proceed to dance with the other members of the court. Caroline court masques, in which Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria regularly danced, tended to be longer, more dialogic, more spectacular, and even more hyperbolic. But early to late, many masques contain features that subtly resist the politics of Stuart absolutism.

The Masque of Blackness

The Queen's Masques: the first Of Blackness

Personated at the Court at Whitehall, on the Twelfth Night, 1605.

Pliny, Solinus, Ptolemy, and of late Leo the African,1 remember unto us a river in Ethiopia famous by the name of Niger,2 of which the people were called Negritae, now Negroes, and are the blackest nation of the world. This river taketh spring out of a certain lake,3 eastward, and after a long race, falleth into the western ocean. Hence (because it was her Majesty's will to have them blackamoors at first) the invention was derived by me, and presented thus.

First, for the scene, was drawn a Landscape4 consisting of small woods, and here and there a void place filled with hunting; which falling, an artificial sea was seen to shoot forth, as if it flowed to the land, raised with waves which seemed to move, and in some places the billow to break,5 as imitating that ordinarily discovered, which is common to nature. In front of the river were placed six little tristons,6 in moving and sprightly actions; their upper parts human, save that their hairs were blue, as partaking of the sea color; their desinent7 partish ends, mounted above their heads, and all varied in disposition. From their backs were borne out certain light pieces of taffeta, as if conveyed by the wind, and their music made out of wrought shells. Behind these, a pair of sea masts, for song, were as conspicuously seated; between which two great sea horses, as big as the life, put forth themselves; the one mounting aloft, and writhing his head from the other, which seemed to sink forwards; so intended for variation, and that the figure behind might come off better. Upon their backs Oceanæs8 and Niger were advanced.

Oceanæs, presented in a human form, the color of his flesh blue, and shadowed with a robe of sea green; his head gray and horned, as he is described by the ancients; his beard of the like mixed color. He was girdled with algae or seaweed, and in his hand a trident.

Niger, in form and color of an Ethiopian, his hair and rare beard curled, shadowed with a blue and bright mantle; his front, neck, and wrists adorned with pearl; and crowned with an artificial wreath of cane and paper-rush.

These induced the masques, which were twelve nymphs, negroes, and the daughters of Niger, attended by so many of the Oceanæs,9 which were their light-bearers.

1. This long introductory note is Jonson's. Leu wrote the Description of Africa (1526); the other three are classical authorities on geography.
2. Cosmo, though not often identified as the
3. Ocean, the
4. Cosmo, though not often identified as the
5. Ocean, the
6. Cosmo, though not often identified as the
7. Ocean, the
The masquers were placed in a great concave shell, like mother of pearl, curiously made to move on those waters, and rise with the billoid; the top thereof was stuck with a chesron of lights which, indested to the proportion of the shell, struck a glorious beam upon them as they were seated one above another; so that they were all seen, but in an extravagant order.  

On sides of the shell did swim six huge sea monsters, varied in their shapes and dispositions, bearing on their backs the twelve torchbearers, who were planted there in several greces, so as the backs of some were seen, some in purple (or side), others in face, and all having their lights burning out of wheelks or mares shells.

The attire of the masquers was alike in all, without difference; the colors azure and silver, their hair thick, and curled upright in tresses, like pyramids, but returned on the top with a scroll and antique dressing of feathers, and jewels interlaced with ropes of pearl. And for the front, ear, neck, and wrists, the ornament was of the most choice and orient pearl, best setting off from the black.

For the light-bearers, sea green, waved about the skirts with gold and silver; their hair loose and flowing, garnished with sea grass, and that stuck with branches of shell.

These thus presented, the scene behind seemed a vast sea (and united with this that flowed forth) from the termination or horizon of which (being the level of the state, which was placed in the upper end of the hall) was drawn, by the lines of perspective, the whole work, shooting downwards from the eye; which decorum made it more conspicuous, and caught the eye afar off with a wandering beauty.

To which was added an obscure and cloudy night piece, that made the whole set off; so much for the bodily part, which was of Master Inigo Jones his design and act.

By this, one of the tritons, with the two sea maidens, began to sing to the others' loud music, their voices being a tenor and two trebles.

SONG
Sound, sound aloud
The welcome of the orient flood
Into the west;
Fair Niger, son to great Oceanus,
Now honored thus
With all his beauteous race,
Who though but black in face,
Yet are they bright,
And full of life and light,
To prove that beauty best
Which not the color, but the feature
Assures unto the creature.

OCEANUS Be silent, now the ceremony's done,
And Niger, say, how comes it, lovely son,
That thou, the Ethiop's river, so far east,
Art seen to fall into the extremest west
Of me, the king of floods, Oceanus,

1. Spread out (inside the shell).
2. Steps.
5. The king's throne, placed at the ideal viewing position, the vanishing point of the perspective.
6. In the poem, the masquers are compared to sea monsters, drawing attention to the beauty of the performers' attire.
10. The presentation of the masquers and sea monsters is compared to a seashell, with lights and feathers creating a stunning effect.
15. The Trinon's song is introduced with a sense of wonder and admiration.
20. The Niger's response is a mixture of reverence and curiosity, highlighting the majesty of the ocean and his role as the son of Oceanus.
25. The Oceanus's words reflect a sense of tranquility and respect.
30. The Masque of Blackness / 1329
35. And in mine empire's heart salute me thus?
My ceaseless current now amazed stands
To see thy labor through so many lands
Mix thy fresh bilow with my brackish stream,
And in thy sweetness, stretch thy diadem?.

TO THESE FAR DISTANT AND UNEQUALUED SLIDES,
This squared circle of celestial bodies.
NIGER Divine Oceanus, 'tis not strange at all
That, since the immortal souls of creatures mortal
Mix with their bodies, yet reserve forever
A power of separation, I should sever
My fresh streams from thy brackish, like things fixed,
Though with thy powerful saltiness thus far mixed.

"Virtue though chained to earth, will still live free;
And hell itself must yield to industry."
OCEANUS But what's the end of thy Herculean labors,
Extents of these calm and blessed shores?

NIGER To do a kind and careful father's part,
In satisfying every pensive heart
Of these my daughters, my most loved birth;
Who, though they were the first formed dames of earth,
In whose sparkling and refluent eyes
The glorious sun did still delight to rise,
Though he (the best judge, and most formal cause)
Of all dames' beauties) in their farm huses draws
Signs of his fervent'st love, and thereby shows
That in their black the perfect beauty grows,
Since the fixed color of their curled hair
(Which is the highest grace of dames most fair)
No cares, no age can change, or there display
The fearful tincture of abhorred gray,
Since Death herself (herself being pale and blue)
Can never alter their most faithful hue;
All which are arguments to prove how far
Their beauties conquer in great beauty's war;
And more, how near divinity they be,
That stand from passion or decay so free.
Yet, since the fabulous voices of some few
Poor brainisck men, styled poets here with you,
Have, with such envy of their graces, sung
The painted beauties other empires sprung,
Letting their loose and winged fictions fly
To infect all climates, yea, our purity;
As of one Phaeton, that fired the world,
That before his headless flames were hurled.

7. The squared circle is an image of perfection, a hyperbolic compliment to Britannia.
8. Alludes to Homer, Odes 1.3.36.
9. The Ethioplean civilization was reputed to be the 2. English Petrarchan poets, whose ideal of beauty involved fair skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. See, e.g., the sonnets of Sidney and Spenser.
3. Son of Apollo the sun god, whose ill-fated
About the globe, the Ethiops were as fair
As other dames, now black with black despair,
And in respect of their complexion changed,
Are eachwhere, since, for luckless creatures ranged.
Which when my daughters heard (as women are)
Most jealous of their beauties) fear and care
Possessed them whole; yea, and believing them, 4
They wept such ceaseless tears into my stream
That it hath thus far overflowed his shore
To seek them patience; who have since e're more
As the sun riseth, charged his burning throne
With volleys of revilings, 'cause he shone
On their scorched cheeks with such intemperate fires,
And other dames made queens of all desires.
To frustrate which strange error oft I sought,
Though most in vain against a settled thought
As women's are, till they confirmed at length
By miracle what I wish so much strength
Of argument resisted; else they feigned:
For in the lake where their first spring they gained,
As they sat cooling their soft limbs one night,
Appeared a face all circumfused with light;
(And sure they saw't, for Ethiops never dream) 5
Wherein they might decipher through the stream
These words:
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.

In search of this have we three princes passed
That speak out -tania in their accents last:
Black Mauritania 6 first, and secondly
Swarth Lusitania, 7 next we did descry
Rich Aquitania, 8 and yet cannot find.
The place unto these longing nymphs designed. 9
Instruct and aid me, great Oceanus:
What land is this that now appears to us?
Oceanus 10 This land, that lifts into the temperate air
His snowy cliff, is Albion the fair,
So called of Neptune's son, 11 who ruleth here;
For whose dear guard, myself four thousand year,
Since old Deucalion's 12 days, have walked the round

---

100

Portugal perceive southwest France appointed

---

About his empire, proud to see him crowned
Above my waves.

At this, the moon was discovered in the upper part of the house, triumphant in a silver throne, made in figure of a pyramis. 1 Her garments white and silver, the dressing of her head antique, and crowned with a luminous or sphere of light, which striking on the clouds, and heightened with silver, reflected as natural cloud do by the splendor of the moon. The heavens about her was vaunted with blue silk, and set with stars of silver which had in them several lights burning. The sudden sight of which made Niger to interrupt Oceanus with this present passion. 2

102

Niger
—O see, our silver star!
Whose pure auspicious light greets us thus far!
Great Ethiopia, goddess of our shore, 3
Since with particular worship we adore
Thy general brightness, let particular grace
Shine on my jealous daughters. Show the place
Which long their longings urged their eyes to see.
Beautify them, which long have deified thee.
Aethiopis. 4 Niger, be glad; resume thy native cheer.
Thy daughters' labors have their period here,
And so thy errors. I was that bright face
Reflected by the lake, in which thy race
Read mystic lines (which skill Pythagoras 5
First taught to men by a reverberate 6 glass).
This blessed isle doth with that-tania end
Which there they saw inscribed, and shall extend
Wished satisfaction to their best desires.
Britannia, which the triple world admires, 7
This isle hath now recovered for her name;
Where reign those beauties that with so much fame
The sacred Muse's sons have honored,
And from bright Hesperus to Eos spread, 8
With that great name, Britannia, this blest isle
Hath won her ancient dignity and style, 9
title, name
A world divided from the world, 10 and tried
The abstract of it in his general pride.
For were the world, with all his wealth, a ring,
Britannia (whom new name makes all tongues sing)
Might be a diamond worthy to enclose it,
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 corpse, 8
His light scientia 12 is and (past mere nature)
Can salve the rude defects of every creature.

---

4. The poets (line 56).
5. See note 2 for the note.
6. Gives a close relationship to the sea. Albion (previous
line) suggests the compactness of the northern
marine.
Call forth thy honored daughters, then,
And let them fore the Britain men
Indent the land with those pure traces;
They flow with in their native graces.
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.

Here the trions 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 relieving of antiquity, and more applying to that original doctrine of sculpture which the Egyptians are said first to have brought from the Ethiopians.

The Queen of Bedford
Euphros
Aglaia
The Names
The Symbolls
A golden tree, laden with fruit

Lady Herbert
Diaphane
Eucampe
Lady Rich
Ocyte
Katharo
Lady Bevill
Notis
Psychrote

Lady Effingham
Psycrute

Lady Elizabeth Howard
Glycyte
Malacia

Lady Susan Vere
Baryte
Periphery

Their own single dance ended, as they were about to make choice of their men, one from the sea was heard to call them with this charm, sung by a tenor voice.

SONG
Come away, come away,
We grow jealous of your stay.
If you do not stop your ear,

We shall have more cause to fear
Sirens of the land, than they
To doubt the sirens of the sea.

Here they danced with their men several measures and corants. All which ended, they were again accented to sea, with a song of two trebles, whose cadences were iterated by a double echo from several parts of the land.

SONG
Daughters of the subtle flood,
Do not let earth longer entertain you;
Lest earth longer entertain you
Tis to them enough of good
You give this little hope to gain you.

If they love
You shall quickly see:
For when to flight you move,
They'll follow you, the more you flee.

Follow you, the more you flee.
The more you flee.

If not, impute it each to other's matter;
They are but earth—
But earth,
And what you vowed was water.

Enough, bright nymphs, the night grows old,
And we are grieved we cannot hold
You longer light; but comfort take.
Your father only to the lake
Shall make return; yourselves, with feasts,
Must here remain the Ocean's guests.

Nur shall this veil the sun hath cast
Above your blood, more summers last.
For which, you shall observe these rites:
Thirteen times thriceth, on thirteen nights
(As 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.
Volpone

This dark satire on human rapacity is set in Venice, but its true target is the city of London, or the city that, Jonson feared, London was about to become. It is a place devoted to commerce and mired in corruption, populated by greedy fools and conniving rascals. Like Shakespeare, Donne, and Thomas More before him, Jonson was deeply disturbed by the rise of a protocapitalist economic order that seemed to emphasize competition and the acquisition of material goods over reciprocal goodwill and mutual obligation. On the other hand, Jonson was also fascinated by the entrepreneurial potential liberated by the new economic order. His protagonists, Volpone and Mosca, may be morally bankrupt, but they are also the most intelligent, adaptable characters in the play. Moreover, although Jonson was a strong advocate for the educational and morally improving potential of the theater—his theater in particular—the talents of his main characters are essentially those of theatrical performance and improvisation. In fact, as Jonson was well aware, he was himself deeply implicated in what he satirized. The lowborn, unscrupulous, brilliantly inventive Mosca, a flattering aristocratic hanger-on who aspires to high status himself, at times seems to be the author's evil twin. Perhaps his very resemblances to Jonson required Jonson so energetically to repudiate his motives and passions at the end of the play.

Volpone combines elements from several sources. The classical satirist Lucian provided the theme of the rich old man playing with money-grubbing scoundrels who hope to inherit his wealth. Roman comedy provided prototypes for some characters: the wily parasite, the unscrupulous lawyer, the avaricious dotard, the pitiable woman. Some scenes, such as that in which Volpone disguises as a mountebank wows Celia at her window, are drawn from the Italian commedia dell'arte. Jonson draws as well upon ancient and medieval beast fables: stories about the crafty antithero Reynard the fox, as well as a fable about a fox that plays dead in order to catch greedy birds. But Volpone is much more than the sum of its borrowings. It is a work of enormous comic energy, full of black humor, which holds its loathsome characters up for appalled but gleeful inspection.

Volpone was first performed by the King's Men (Shakespeare's company) in the spring of 1606, at the Globe Theater. (See the illustration, in the appendices to this volume, of a contemporary popular theater constructed on similar lines.) The Globe seated some two thousand persons—aristocrats and prosperous citizens in the tiered galleries, lower-class "groundlings" in the pit in the front of the stage. The play was also performed to great applause before learned audiences at Oxford and Cambridge, to whom Jonson dedicated the printed edition of Volpone. It was first published in quarto form in 1607 and republished with a few changes in the 1616 Works, the basis for the present text.

Volpone
or
The Fox

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

Volpone, a magnifico
MOSCA, his parasite
NANO, a dwarf
ANDROGYNO, a heraphrodite
CASTRONE, an eunuch
VOLTORE, an advocate
CORRACCO, an old gentleman
BONARIO, a young gentleman [CORRACCO'S son]
CORVINO, a merchant
CELIA, the merchant's wife
SERVISTE, a servant [to CORVINO]
[Sir] POLITIC Would-be, a knight
FINE MADAME [LADY] WOULD-BE, the knight's wife
[Two] WOMEN [servants to lady would-be]
PEREGRINE, a gentleman traveler
AVOCATOR, "four magistrates"
NOTARIO [NOTARY], the register
COMMENDATORI, "officers"
[Other court officials, litter-bearers]
Mercator, three MERCHANTS
Grege [members of a crowd]

Venetian nobleman
hanger-on
lawyer

"Volpone" means "raven." "Bonario" is derived from bono, meaning "good." "Cervino" means "cervine." "Celia" means "beaver." "Polite" means "worldly-wise" or "romanised." "Peregrine" means "traveler" or "wanderer."