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«To Blanch an Aethiop»

The white woman as archetypical beauty is ubiquitous in European medieval culture, and colonial culture has left a lasting impression on African women, making them believe that whiteness is beauty. *The Masque of Blackness*, a theatrical-political representation of Seventeenth-century England, expresses the idea of bleaching women's black skin white to save and include them.

by Edvige Pucciarelli

From Aesop to King James Bible

We are all accustomed to quoting the biblical verses: «Can the Ethiopian/change his skinne? Or/ the leopard his spots?/ then may ye also doe/ good, that are accustomed to doe/euill./» (*King James Version Bible, Jeremiah 13:23*).¹

In fact, this mode of expression signifying the immutability of a person's moral fibre - which is the widespread interpretation of the quote - has its roots in multiple forms in cultures including long past ancient times.

The first written record is ascribed to Aesop's *The Aethiopian*, number 343 in the *Perry Index Aesopica*.² In the fable, Aesop mentions a black slave washing without becoming white. *The Perry Index* offers both the Greek and the Latin texts. For clarity's sake, I must note that in the Greek text the slave is defined as an «Aethiop» as all the later Latin versions. The scholar G. F. Townsend offers the following literal translation into English entitling the fable *The Aethiop*:

The purchaser of a black servant was persuaded that the color of his skin arose from dirt contracted through the neglect of his former masters. On bringing him home he resorted to every means of cleaning, and subjected the man to incessant scrubblings. The servant caught a severe cold, but he never changed his color or complexion.³

The servant of the fable is connoted as «black», implying Ethiopian, and the same adjective «black» is used as a synonym in many translations. However, in the latest *Oxford World's Classics*⁴ version, unfortunately, the translator arbitrarily decides that the black slave hails from India. Many

translations, dating from Early Modern English onwards, render «Ethiopian», with another textual interpretation, as a «Blackamoor» («black» and «moor»), a term often to be found in many writers, including the poet and playwright Ben Jonson.

It is of particular interest, in this current context, that Aesop himself, a slave according to sources, was considered by scholars to be Ethiopian or of African descent in any case. Scholars maintain that the very name Aesop is a corruption of «Aethiop».

Starting from the spread of Christianity, this proverbial expression permeates modern cultures even more deeply.⁵ Pertaining to my present discussion for both historical and cultural reasons, it is vital to bring out the importance of the *Authorized King James Version of the Bible* (1611), in which the translation of these verses offers a moral judgement, which assumes a strongly racial meaning later on. The overtly racially charged tone belongs to the developments of British Colonialism during the reign of James I Stuart (the son of Queen Mary Stuart and the successor of Elizabeth I Tudor).

Ethiopian Women in Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness*

First of all, there is the need to clarify the fact that masques were lavish dramatic entertainments whose function was entirely political. When James I ascended to the throne of England in 1603, he had to deal with the annexation of the kingdoms of Scotland, Wales and Ireland to that of England - in itself an inside colonialism - alongside affirming his kingdom as a colonial power.

Masques proved to be the perfect political tool of Stuart propaganda, in the form of a courtly panegyric, to promote the Kingdom of Great Britain, with the newly formed con-



Inigo Jones, design for
Masque of Blackness, 1605.
commons.wikimedia.org

cept of a unified British “race” and nationality, as a rising international colonial power. *The Masque of Blackness*⁶ plays a role of particular importance in this political sense, as it offers a rare glimpse of early modern conception of Africa, which seems to establish an apparent multiculturalism of Stuart Britannia. The masque recounts how Niger, the river deity, has travelled by sea from the east of Africa with his twelve black daughters, who are in despair, having discovered that only white skin is considered beautiful.

Court masques, unlike other forms of dramatic representations, were performed only once for a selected audience of aristocrats and courtiers. The interpreters were both professional actors and members of the Court. In *Blackness*, performed on Twelfth Night in 1605 at Whitehall, Queen Anna⁷ (the Danish princess - spouse of King James I - who was the first Queen Consort in Great Britain) and eleven aristocratic ladies appear on stage painted black and costumed as Ethiopian nymphs. The nymphs were instructed in a vision «[t]hat they a land must forthwith seek, / Whose termination (of the Greek) / Sounds -Tania» (ll. 164-6) and in search of this country they have passed through «Black Mauritania», «Swarth Lusitania» and «Rich Aquitania» (ll. 174-6), finally arriving at a unidentified place. At this point the moon goddess Aethiopia (a deity of Jonson’s invention) appears, revealing to Niger that it was she who «was that bright face/Reflected by the lake» (l. 206) and that they have arrived at their destination «-tannia», “Britannia”.

Most of the first scene involves a conversation between Niger and Oceanus, god of the sea that encircles England. During this conversation, Niger explains the nymphs’ identity and narrates their wandering quest to find the land hinted at in their vision. In turn, Oceanus explains the identity of the court and the Banqueting House, but he does not satisfy the vision’s riddle: he refers to the Banqueting House symbolically as «Albion», not «Britannia» (l. 187). Finally, the moon goddess Aethiopia appears and informs Niger that he and his daughters are, in fact, in «Britannia», where King James will use his «scientall» healing powers to turn the nymphs’ skin white (l. 219). Before they become part of the British Empire, a rite has to be performed during which they are washed white. Aethiopia then welcomes the nymphs into the Banqueting House and prompts them to descend and dance - an act of symbolical inclusion. Ultimately, and by the dictates of convention, the ladies do retreat, but with Aethiopia’s promise that they will return the following year having metamorphosed their black skin-into white.

According to Jonson, Anna wanted the women to appear in blackface «at first», meaning at the beginning. It is also worth considering the results of Anna’s choice of representing blackness with paint rather than masks as had been traditional. The inevitable outcome was that the transformation into whiteness could not be enacted at the end of the masque - the women could not wash their make-up off in

time, so the metamorphosis necessarily had to be delayed until the sequel of *Blackness*, *The Masque of Beauty*.

In *The Masque of Beauty*, the twelve daughters of Niger were described as having already been transformed into white noblewomen by the «scientall» power of King James. The alteration of black skin into white is operated by the powers of Albion, the Sun-King of «Britannia», which is a glorious personification of James I,⁸ the privileged onlooker seated in the king’s box and the real focal point of the Hall. James also symbolised the Renaissance monarch who brings light to darkness. In fact, the African nymphs are «healed» through a skin colour-change-- the two masques being an enacted evocation on stage of the long European tradition that associates the monarchy with powers for healing skin disorders, above all scrofula⁹ - hence the reiterated reference to the «scientall king» in *Blackness*. In both Jonson’s *Masques*, James I thaumaturgically performs a catharsis and a “racial” inclusion, which brings a shared white identity to the Non-Europeans - this gesture bringing unity and coherence to the British Nation and to the rising Colonial Empire. Recent critics have pointed out how Anna’s performance furthers Jacobean patriarchy and geo-politics. Richmond

Barbour, and nearly all post-colonial critics of *Blackness*, suggests the masquers’ black appearance stresses Jacobean claims to British Imperialism.¹⁰ Some critics note Anna’s assertion, through the masque, of her queenly power, to which her blackness and exoticism are constituting factors. Queen Anna reminds us of the spouse in the

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Song of Songs, who describes herself as «[I am] black, but comely»,¹¹ in the *King James Bible*. Anna’s power of femininity as a black woman contributes to an early modern construction of gender and race, with strong implications for the Stuart proto-colonial political discourse.¹²

The masque offered Banqueting House and the court as a microcosm of British Empire and a destination for the twelve Lady-masquers’ fictive journey. It also shows the masquers as exotic Ethiopian travellers and wanderers representing outsiders trying to reach their new *metropolitan* nation. When Anna and her retinue of ladies and dancers approach the court group in the Banqueting House, they are simply imitating real-life encounters in and around Whitehall, when the Stuart court was greeting outsiders of all kinds, from ordinary citizens, allowed by tradition to call on the new monarchs, to members of the English and Scottish aristocracy, to foreign ambassadors and other elite dignitaries from the world’s Colonies. *Blackness* enacted such encounters through the meanings floating through its proscenium arch as well as its gestural dances performed closer to the elite and the public. The masque inserts into this cohesion the theme of the Jacobean British Empire, expanding the court’s coherence into coherence in space with a geo-political vision of unity, including between the Scots-English peoples. It is important to underline the fact that Scotland was

considered as a land to be conquered and annexed to the English nation by the Tudor monarchs in the same manner as the colonies.

Their blackness is significant as Non-British otherness.¹³ Their blackness also evokes a legend tracing Scotland's national origins back to Scota, the daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh, and by doing so, it also represents the Scots that James had just introduced into court as new subjects of his unified British kingdom.

As the stage characters discuss the quest, they promote the court in imperial terms that culminate in Aethiopia's «Britannia». *Blackness* expresses significant socio-political phenomena, giving the court a chance to grasp its own local coherence in the Banqueting House expanded and asserted in imperial terms.

Blackness displays referents that the whole court shares: the hall and its constituent spaces. Oceanus, Niger, and Aethiopia deploy their demonstrative style to communicate curiosity, wonder, or pride about those spaces, and to identify them as microcosmic elements of the British Colonial Empire. Aethiopia uses this shared ideological knowledge when she utters the masque's most controversial, and ideologically-connoted term, referring to the hall, «Britannia». In the masque, the court's understanding of national and imperial coherence in the Banqueting House is not just theatrical, rhetorical, or spatial but intensely physical as well.

The 12 nymphs-masquers' travelling - from Mauretania to Lusitania to Aquitania - achieve the goal of their quest arriving at the Banqueting House. Aethiopia also reconsiders British history as an epic by suggesting that James has not imposed Empire on his subjects, but rather restored England, Scotland, Wales and now the Colonies to their "ancient dignity and style". When the lady-masquers descend to dance with their audience in the microcosm of the hall, they re-affirm the court's imperial experience in space by means of breaching real space with the inclusion of Colonial space.¹⁴

Likewise, the British subjects must accept that «Britannia» incorporates outsiders. This fact explains the capacity of expansion to incorporate the new foreign members of the Nation and the Empire.

Whiteness in itself proves to be an insufficient principle for the masquers' inclusion. It is, in fact, the pure white «Albion» that must allow «Britannia» to absorb the ladies and, through James's powers, blanch them white. As «Britannia», the court must feel itself, at least momentarily, as a "racial" and ethnic hybrid, an entity made coherent by its ability to incorporate, rather than repel others. In this way, the masque combines the epic and imperial with the welcoming acceptance of foreigners, who are Britain's new colonial subjects, forming part of the British Empire being created by James I.

At the end of the masque, Aethiopia explains how the ladies will blanch themselves white. She instructs the nymphs to

undergo a year-long bathing regimen that will turn their skin white (ll. 314-15). Afterward, she declares, «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.» (ll. 331-34). The miraculous skin-blanching transformation that Aethiopia had promised earlier is delayed for a year-long process that the ladies will undergo as the «guests» of «Britannia».

Jonson delayed the transformation to the following revels season, when Anna and her ladies were supposed to re-enact in their roles in a sequel, Jonson's own *Masque of Beauty* (1608).

Still "blanching" daughters: contemporary reflections on skin lightening practices

The white woman as archetypal beauty is ubiquitous in European Medieval literature. This conceptualised prototype of beauty is passed on through literary and other artistic media. The dominance of this *topos* has imposed an idealised white paradigm, which most women, including those of African descent, aspire to and emulate to feel more beautiful. From the nineteenth century onwards, the use of bleaching

agents in soaps and creams has become almost a norm - in the hope to obtain unblemished white skin for women in general, more so in Africa. The bleaching agents contained in the creams were normally highly poisonous, such as arsenic, and were lately banned in some Countries, i.e. Europe and some African Countries, although they are still availa-

ble on the internet. The advertisements for these products used, and use, overtly offensive racist tones.¹⁵

The white model of beauty is always present even in the popular novels, especially for teenage readers, written by authors such as Barbara Cartland and partly Georgette Heyer. Such novels proposing "dazzling skin whiteness" also have a huge market in Africa.

The loss of skin pigmentation in black people as a result of the whitening process proves to be a literary *topos* as much as a structural constant, in a Lévy-Strauss based hermeneutic approach, in twentieth-century literature. Many African novelists have been extremely critical of the use of skin bleaching agents, vehemently condemning these practices. Frantz Fanon in *Peau Noire Masques Blancs*¹⁶ denounces the influence of Colonial Culture that has left the lasting impression in black women that whiteness is virtue and beauty. Fanon devotes Chapter Five of the book, entitled "L'expérience vécue du Noire" to the vexing question of "Black" and "White". These attempts at bleaching skin go with the social ambition to achieve a better social standing - trying to fit in to the dominant white class-system in Colonial and Post-Colonial Countries. Fanon stresses his social critique of the colonial world and starts an intellectual debate on it, while theorizing in his text that the blacks have been made to think

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thaumaturgically performs a catharsis and a
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that there is an underlying cause of conflict existing between whiteness and blackness manifesting itself in complicated emotional states of superiority and inferiority. In her article on the Senegales “signares”, F.R. Paci¹⁷ briefly offers insights into the novel *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal* (1951; revised version 1954) by Abdoulaye Sadji,¹⁸ extracts from which had been published previously in *Présence Africaine* (1947). Paci reminds us that Frantz Fanon in Chapter Two entitled “La femme de couleur et le Blanc” of his *Peau noire, masques blancs*¹⁹ quotes and comments on the extracts from *Nini*. She stresses how the novel focuses on the aspirations to marry a white man of a beautiful young mulatto typist. Sadji, in a lucid narrative, analyses the obsession of the protagonist with the idea of “whiteness” offering the reader a detached view on the relationships between Africa and the Western Civilisation, going into perceived concepts of whiteness and blackness, in a similar way to Fanon.

The obsession of some black people - whatever their origin might be - with whiteness is still strongly felt in African Countries and in black communities worldwide. As a result, skin bleaching practices are just a part of the lives of a significant number of people who are perpetuating the notion that the lighter you are, the more beautiful you are.²⁰ Being still considered the epitome of beauty, to have a fairer skin is embraced and promoted by pop singers, actresses and other celebrities of colour such as Beyoncé, Nicky Minaj and Nigerian Dencia²¹ - not to mention Michael Jackson.

Influenced by the media barrage of these black-beauty icons, black women in African Countries like Ethiopia, Somalia, Ghana and Nigeria, where skin lighteners have been a global popular feature of their culture for more than a century, have increased the use of bleaching agents ignoring all the dangers despite the warnings of the scientific community and the attempts to ban high-risk whitening creams. Anti-racists thinkers and health professional advocates have been very vocal in issuing warnings against these practices, which have developed into a social plight, causing lasting skin damage such as burns, arsenic systemic intoxication and random discolouring due to the contents of these creams, high in percentages of arsenic and hydroquinone.²² To stop this dangerous phenomenon, organisations, such as the “Beauty Well Project”,²³ a US-based organisation run by a Somali immigrant, Amira Adawe, have launched educational projects to reverse this obsession with whiteness in African Countries, as well as in black communities abroad, to affirm that “blackness is beautiful”. In the last years, East African Countries have moved towards a total ban on skin bleaching products. So far only Kenya, Tanzania and Ghana banned the use of these creams, although it is easy to import them illegally. The East African Legislative Assembly,²⁴ to which Somalia belongs, passed a resolution in 2018 to ban the importations of cosmetics containing hydroquinone but despite this resolution use of bleaching creams is still widespread.

The “Black Is Beautiful” call for awareness, strongly advocated by the Beauty Well Project, finds its roots in the eponymous Cultural Movement originated in the United States of America in the Sixties by African Americans. Yet again, the emphasis is on the importance of racial identity among

people of African descent worldwide and the insistence to promote natural African features, including skin colour, as intrinsically beautiful to oppose the racist notion that Blacks are less attractive than Whites. We may hope in the success of the campaigns to abolish the idea of blanching Ethiopians.

NOTES

1 - *The Authorized King James Version of the Bible* 1611, www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1611/Jeremiah-Chapter-13/#21. Acc. on 12/07/2020.

2 - I follow the prominent scholars’ ascription to Aesop. For the history of the expression in ancient literatures see F. Faloppa, *Sbiancare un etiopo. La pelle cangiante di un tòpos antico*, Aracne, Roma 2013.

3 - The fable is numbered 26 in the edition by G. Fyler Townsend, *Three hundred Aesop’s fables. Literally translated from the Greek by Aesop*, Routledge, London 1867. Cons. online.fablesfoesaop.com/the-servant.html. Acc. on 24/07/2020.

4 - *Aesop’s Fables. A New Translation* by L. Gibbs, Oxford University Press (World’s Classics), Oxford 2002.

5 - In the *Septuagint* and in Jerome’s Latin *Vulgate* version, we find the term «Ethiopian» whereas the Hebrew texts indicate «Cushite». On the history and etymology of the term, see F. R. Paci *Before our Past* in this number of *Africa e Mediterraneo*.

6 - The masque was presented, in the Whitehall Banqueting House, by Ben Jonson in 1605. Ben Jonson, *The Queen’s Masques: the First of Blackness in Inigo Jones: The Theatre of the Stuart Court*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong, University of California Press, Los Angeles 1973, cited in text by line number.

7 - Queen Anna of Denmark (1586-1619) married James Stuart (1566-1625), VI of Scotland and I of England.

8 - James I achieved the union of the Scottish and English crowns ascending to the throne of England on 24 March 1603. He was the first monarch to be called the king of Great Britain having proclaimed himself king of Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland in 1604.

9 - On the thaumaturgical power of kings to heal diseases, see R. Crawford, *The King’s Evil*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1911; J. Fraser, *The Golden Bough*, London 1922; M. Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1924 translated into English by J.E. Anderson, *Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1973.

10 - R. Barbour, *Britain and the Great Beyond: The Masque of Blackness at Whitehall*, in *Playing the Globe: Genre and Geography*, in J. Gilles, V. Mason Vaughan (eds.), *English Renaissance Drama*, Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, Madison 1989). W. Over, *Alterity and Assimilation in Jonson’s Masques of Blackness and Beauty: ‘I, with so much strength / Of argument resisted’*, in «Culture, Language and Presentation» n. 1, 2004, pp. 43-54.

11 - Song of Songs, Ch. 1, v. 5, *The Authorized King James Version of the Bible* 1611, www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Song-of-Solomon-Chapter-1/. Acc. on 12/10/2020.

12 - B. Andrea, *Black Skin, the Queen’s Masques: Africanist Ambivalences and Feminine Author(ity)*, in *the Masques of Blackness and Beauty*, in «English Literary Renaissance», n. 29, 1999, pp. 246-81. H. Asand, “*To Blanch an Ethiop, and Revive a Corse*”: Queen Anne and The Masque of Blackness, in «Studies in English Literature» n. 32, 1992, pp. 271-85.

13 - As W. Over points out, Jonson glosses these lines with a classical source, citing Diodorus Siculus’s argument that «Africans were the first humans’ and thus longest-blessed with access to the sun’s light. In Niger’s interpretation, the nymphs’ sun-darkened skin grants marks their immortality and enduring beauty» (*op. cit.*, p. 47). As Over observes, Jonson here draws on and revises classical sources that claim Africans re-

vile the sun for making them black and desire white skin instead (*op. cit.*, p. 45). See also Jonson's note in the *Appendix of Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*, *op. cit.*, pp. 509-11, where he cites Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, and Pliny.

14 - R. Barbour, *Britain and the Great Beyond*, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-39.

15 - See J.M. Massing, *From Greek Proverb to Soap Advert: Washing the Ethiopian*, in «Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes», Vol. 58 (1995), pp. 180-201, The Warburg Institute, London.

16 - F. Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1952.

17 - F.R. Paci, *Meticce e potenti: il fascino delle signares senegalesi nelle immagini di Paola Mattioli*, in «Africa e Mediterraneo», n. 89, Dicembre 2018, pp. 76-83.

18 - A. Sadji, *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal*, Présence Africaine, 1954.

19 - F. Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, *op.cit.*

20 - See L. M. Thomas, *Beneath the Surface: a Transnational History of Skin Lighteners*, Duke University Press, Durham USA, 2020.

21 - Dencia founded the cosmetics company Whitenicious, in 2014, which promotes lightening creams. See Mako Muzenda, *Blac Chyna Came To Nigeria To Launch A Skin-Lightening Cream At \$250 A Jar*

2018, www.npr.org/sections/goatsand_soda/2018/11/30/671879261/blac-chyna-came-tonigeria-to-lauch-a-skin-lightening-cream-at-a-250-a-jar. Acc. on 23/9/2020. J. Pierre, 2008, "I like your colour!" *skin bleaching and geographies of race in urban Ghana*, in «Feminist Review», n. 90, pp. 9-29. See also N. Tee, *Celebrities bleaching skin*, 2018, www.metro.co.uk/2018/11/24/blac-chynas-skin-lightening-cream-makes-black-women-think-dark-skin-cant-be-beautiful-81688216/amp7. Acc. on 15/9/2020.

22 - See S. Yeboah, *My toxic love affair with skin lightening creams*, 8 Apr. 2019, amp.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/apr/08/bleaching-creams-skin-toxic-love-affair. Acc. on 3/7/2020.

23 - *The Beauty Well Project*, thebeautywell.org/. Accessed on 4/8/2020.

24 - *East African Countries move to ban skin-bleaching products*, 2018, www.voanews.com/archive/east-african-countries-move-ban-skin-bleaching-products.

«Sbiancare un Etiope»

L'articolo affronta il topos biblico-letterario dello "sbiancare un Etiope", presente già nelle favole di Esopo, e verte sulla ricezione dello stesso a partire dal Seicento inglese.

Il tema viene analizzato nel contesto specifico della rappresentazione teatrale nella corte di re Giacomo I Stuart. L'autrice mette in rilievo il tema della bellezza femminile nel *Masque of Blackness* (1605) di Ben Jonson - in cui le dodici figlie del dio Niger giungono in Britannia e ricevono la promessa che grazie al potere taumaturgico del re potranno trasformare la loro pelle da nera a bianca - contestualizzandolo in una prospettiva politica, con accezione razziale, proto-coloniale.

Viene discussa concisamente la ricezione storico-culturale del portato tematico-semanticamente della bellezza femminile legata alla pelle bianca in epoca contemporanea per mettere in risalto le origini antiche della pratica dello sbiancamento chimico della pelle nelle popolazioni africane o di origine africana, sia in Europa sia negli Stati Uniti.

Particolare attenzione è dedicata all'analisi della ricezione dell'immagine della bellezza della pelle bianca contrapposta alla pelle nera nel romanzo contemporaneo di autori africani.

Una sezione dell'articolo è dedicata a sottolineare i gravi rischi per la salute che l'uso di prodotti di sbiancamento chimico della pelle provoca, esortando a riconsiderare i modelli di bellezza e rivendicando l'intrinseca bellezza propria delle differenti etnie, così come è proposto da diverse campagne di sensibilizzazione.

La chiosa finale sottolinea la necessità di riproporre il messaggio filosofico-culturale che "Nero è bello", legato storicamente al movimento culturale originatosi nel 1960 negli Stati Uniti d'America, anche per arginare l'uso di agenti chimici sbiancanti che determinano gravi danni alla salute.

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Fig. 1
© Aida Muluneh, *The World is 9; Conversation*,
2016, photograph.

