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The Making of English Slave Iconography:

Emerging xenophobia toward black Africans in the coat of arms of Sir John Hawkins (1568) and Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* (1605).

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This article will investigate the developing representations of black Africans during the Tudor and early Stuart periods. The presence of Africans in England during this time is frequently overlooked as their residence is often only discernible through scant evidence, in the form of church records, literature and material culture. By examining the coat of arms of Sir John Hawkins (Figure 1) and Ben Jonson's 'The Masque of Blackness', this article will demonstrate how, although the transatlantic slave trade was not yet prevalent, visual imagery and material culture representing Africans during the Tudor and Stuart periods were already beginning to reflect an attitude equating blackness with the status of 'sub-human', a belief that seemingly defined nearly all later English depictions of Africans, as well as being used to justify the English position on the slave trade.

On 6 January 1605 *The Masque of Blackness* was performed in the banqueting hall of Whitehall Palace. In the production, Queen Anne of Denmark and eleven other ladies of the nobility portrayed the 'twelve nymphs, negroes, and daughters of Niger'¹ as they attempted to search for 'Albion the fair', who would liberate them from their 'black despair'.² Masques such as these were written 'for the court and about the court',³ skilfully weaving mythology, symbology and allegory in order to represent court life and politics. With the performance to be attended by foreign ambassadors

¹ Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Blackness*, in *Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques*, ed. by Richard Harp (New York: W.W Norton & Company, Inc, 2001), p.315.

² Jonson, p.319.

³ Stephen Orgel, *Illusion of Power* (London: University of California Press, 1975), p.38.

and high-ranking individuals from court,⁴ writer Ben Jonson and designer Inigo Jones created a lavish masque that was a highlight of the social calendar. *The Masque of Blackness* was meant to demonstrate the superiority of England, and of its new King, James I, over all other nations, juxtaposing the position of England against that of the rest of the world by utilising expensive costumes, special effects and outlandish makeup. Yet, *The Masque of Blackness* was remembered by some individuals at court, such as parliamentarian Dudley Carleton, for a different reason:

Their black faces and hands, which were painted and bare up the elbows, was a very loathsome sight and I am sorry that strangers should see our court so strangely disguised.⁵

This reaction is significant. The passing comment made in one of Carleton's personal letters indicates the existence of an attitude that would become the linchpin of the transatlantic slave trade. Thirty-seven years earlier, Sir John Hawkins, who undertook what is widely considered to be the first attempt at English slave trading, had a coat of arms commissioned by Queen Elizabeth I.⁶ The crest was generally

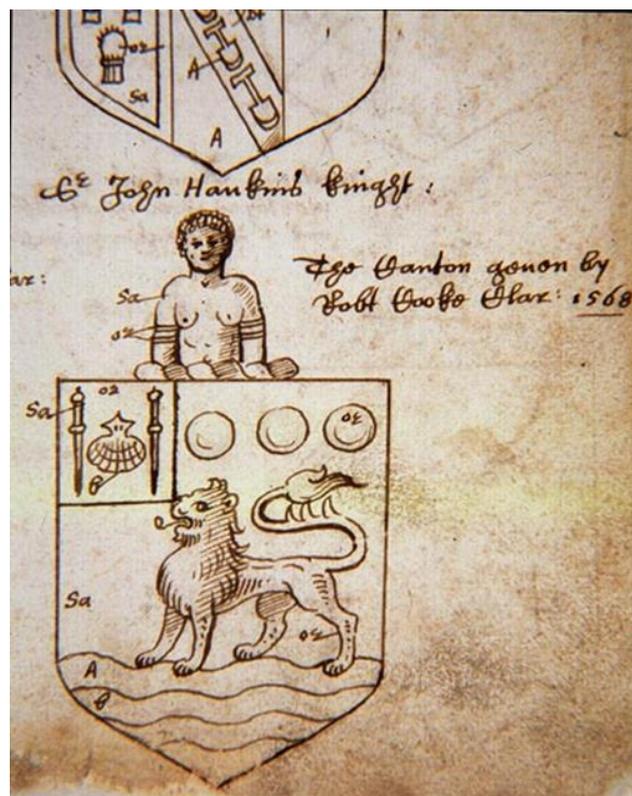


Figure 1. Sir John Hawkins' coat of arms, design sketch, 1568. Reproduced with the permission of The College of Arms, London.

⁴ David M. Bergeron, 'Court Masques about Stuart London', *Studies in Philology*, 113.4 (2016), 822–849.

⁵ Maurice Lee (ed.) *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain 1603-1624. Jacobean Letters* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972), pp.67-68.

⁶ Matthieu Chapman, *Anti-Black Racism in Early Modern English Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p.128.

unremarkable and included similar heraldic imagery to other designs of the period; however, Hawkins' coat of arms had one exception, since it displayed the first image produced in England of an enslaved African.

From the commissioning of Sir John Hawkins' coat of arms in 1568 to the first performance of *The Masque of Blackness* in 1605, English visual culture seemingly underwent a shift that reflected a growing xenophobic attitude towards Africans. In exploring these two objects, this essay will examine changing contemporary attitudes towards 'Blackamoors', 'Negars' and 'Strangers' in England. Furthermore, the essay will consider the role that visual representations of Africans from after 1558 played in equating blackness with the status of 'sub-human' and further helping to standardise a notion of racial superiority that would permeate both visual and imperial culture for the next two hundred years.

Literature and artwork depicting Africans in England during the Tudor period is sparse. However, there is enough surviving material to present a limited picture of life for such individuals during this period. It is known from surviving church records that many non-Europeans resided throughout England.⁷ Indeed, Miranda Kaufmann identifies Africans who, usually as a result of their conversion to Christianity, managed to assimilate into English life, working and often marrying into their new communities. Although this was not a regular occurrence, ever-expanding trade boundaries meant that more individuals from African countries could reach England, eventually finding employment as servants, musicians and tradesman. There is visual evidence of London guild crests bearing 'Moorish' and 'Blackamoor' iconography, including records of a notable silk weaver, Reasonable Blackman, who made his living in Elizabethan Southwark.⁸

Sir John Hawkins' coat of arms is particularly significant in this regard, since it represents the first reference to slave trading by an Englishman. When Queen Elizabeth I commissioned John Hawkins' coat of arms in 1568, England had just begun to take its first steps into the incredibly dangerous, yet incredibly lucrative, slave trade. Hawkins, in partnership with his famous cousin Sir Francis Drake, had pioneered this practice in 1562 and, despite an eventual crew mortality rate of 88 percent,⁹ still returned to England a success, with record financial profits. Hawkins opted to sponsor a second trip that was made just two years later, which was in part financed by Elizabeth, who, as well as intending to receive a large return on the Crown's investment, apparently had no issue with the trade in human cargo. In fact, she even went so far as to allow Hawkins to use the royal ship, the *Jesus of Lubeck*.¹⁰ The Crown's financial support of Hawkins, and the commissioning of his coat of arms,

⁷ Miranda Kaufmann, *Black Tudors* (London: Oneword 2017) pp.134–168.

⁸ Kaufmann, pp.113–133.

⁹ Harry Kelsey, *Sir John Hawkins* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p.30.

¹⁰ Kelsey, p.48.

indicates that Elizabeth and her Privy Council had a burgeoning interest in the emerging slave trade of Africans.¹¹

During this period, terms such as ‘Blackamoor’ seemingly ‘existed in the early modern English psyche as indicative of a concept of abstract absence’.¹² Therefore, as Matthieu Chapman argues, ‘deploying the term Negro, then, as a collective descriptor for black Africans serves to ground that abstraction in a corporeal form that is more easily commodified’.¹³ Indeed, it is evident from contemporary travel accounts that notions of racial superiority were already prevalent, especially in relation to the broad classification of all African tribes as, first and foremost, ‘Negro’. Richard Eden’s widely read account of John Lok’s voyage to Mina included a comment that ‘Moores, Moorens, or Negroes, a people of beastly living, without a God, lawe, religion, or commonwealth, and so scorched and vexed with the heat of the sunne that in many places they curse it, when it riseth’.¹⁴ Hawkins’ personal attitudes are reflected in his writings, some of which represent the earliest narratives of contact with Africans.¹⁵ In his accounts, Hawkins makes it evident that colour was the ‘primary determinant of difference’.¹⁶



Figure 2. Sir John Hawkins’ Coat of Arms, stained glass, later 19th century re-design. Reproduced with the permission of Mr Alex Newman.

¹¹ Weissbourd, pp.1–19.

¹² Chapman, p.129.

¹³ Chapman, p.129.

¹⁴ Richard Eden, ‘Account of John Lok’s Voyage to Mina, 1554-5’, in *Europeans in West Africa v.2*, ed. by John William Blake (London: Glasgow University Press, 1942), p.338.

¹⁵ Chapman, p.128.

¹⁶ Chapman, p.129.

Remarkably, he does not distinguish between tribes' cultural variances, but rather their efficiency at waging war against each other.¹⁷ Chapman points out that Hawkins is an overlooked figure, not just in terms of his role in the development of the later triangle trade, but also his role in using blackness to categorise Africans as 'sub-human'. The narrative of Hawkins's first voyage deployed the term Negro as a descriptor of what was later given the oxymoronic phrase 'human cargo'.¹⁸

Interestingly, the African figure that adorns the preliminary sketch of Hawkins' crest is not in chains, which has led to the notion that the image only reflects Hawkins' contact with Africans, not his practice of slavery. Indeed, although later re-designs of Hawkins' crest do clarify the African as a slave (Figure 2), the first image is adorned only with armlets, a common fashion for African women, as noted by John Lok.¹⁹ However, Kate Lowe argues that visual representations of Africans wearing expensive jewellery during this period would have been an indicator of their owners' status and their desire to have their slaves adored with finery.²⁰

Africans had resided in England and been assimilated into the national culture long before John Lok travelled to Africa, and before Sir John Hawkins had his coat of arms commissioned. However, during the late sixteenth century, following a surge in population, England began to suffer from poor harvests, which led to increased vagrancy and starvation. These issues fostered a xenophobic attitude towards these 'Blackamoors', 'Negros' and 'Strangers'. This prejudice is often reflected in plays written during the period. For example, in *Sir Thomas More*, a soliloquy given by More rails against the unfair treatment of these 'strangers':

Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise
Hath chid down all the majesty of England;
Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
Their babies at their backs and their poor luggage,
Plodding tooth ports and costs for transportation,
And that you sit as kings in your desires,
Authority quite silent by your brawl,
And you in ruff of your opinions clothed.²¹

However, whether motivated by profit, prejudice, or both, this growing public discontent was exploited by Queen Elizabeth I. Emily Weissbourd argues that this is most evident through the two

¹⁷ Chapman, p.130.

¹⁸ Chapman, p.131.

¹⁹ Eden, p.342.

²⁰ Kate Lowe, *The Stereotyping of Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.24.

²¹ Anthony Munday & Henry Chettle, *Sir Thomas More* (London: A & C Black Publisher, 2011), pp.188-189.

‘expulsion’ proclamations issued by Elizabeth I. Issued in 1596, the first proclamation explains the Crown’s position:

Her Majesty’s pleasure therefore ys that those kinde of people should be sent forth of the lande, and for that purpose there ys direction given to this bearer Edward Banes to take of those blackmoores that in this last voyage under Sir Thomas Baskervile were brought into this realme the number of tenn, to be transported by him out of the realme.²²

The second proclamation requested that all ‘Negroes and Blackamoors’ hand themselves over to Casper Van Senden, a Dutch trader.²³ Weissbourd believes proclamations such as these indicate that a discourse already existed during the late sixteenth century that was beginning to link blackness with slavery, especially with regards to the nobility.²⁴ It is apparent that it would have been a turbulent period for any Africans living in England during the end of the sixteenth century as negative attitudes were beginning to become more predominant.

Nine years later, when *The Masque of Blackness* was performed, England still did not formally trade in human cargo. However, further prejudice towards colour was apparent in the masque, and not just from the reaction from some members of the audience, such as Dudley Carleton. The use of black makeup on the twelve nymphs was meant to juxtapose effectively the light of England against the darkness of rest of the world. Indeed, masques were designed to be elaborate, and they incorporated



Figure 3. Geoffrey Whitney, *The Impossible Task: A Choice of Emblems*, 1586.

²² *Acts of the Privy Council: New Series*, ed. by John Roche Dasent, 46 vols (London, 1890–1964), XXVI, 16–17.

²³ *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. by Paul L. Hughes, and James F. Larkin, 3 vols (New Haven, Conn., 1964–69) III, 22.

²⁴ Emily Weissbourd. “‘Those in Their Possession’: Race, Slavery, and Queen Elizabeth’s ‘Edicts of Expulsion.’” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 78.1, 2015, pp.1–19 (p.1).

flamboyant special effects intended to, as Stephen Orgel notes, ‘control the audience’s attention through its eyes’.²⁵ *The Masque of Blackness* was meant to be an elaborate spectacle, rendering audience members as ‘living emblems of the autocratic hierarchy’,²⁶ that also fostered an immediate response from spectators.²⁷ The notion of ‘blackness’ existing as a result of the scorching sun, something that has blackened previously fair skin, was a common interpretation during the Tudor period. This was demonstrated in popular emblems such as *The Impossible Task* (figure 3), from Geoffrey Whitney’s 1586 book *A Choice of Emblems*.²⁸ Therefore, it is no surprise that this concept was utilised purely to gain a visual reaction as well as to effectively demonstrate the opposing effect of the light of the King. However, there are passages in the masque that go further than just utilising black makeup for special effects. Jonson describes blackness as a ‘defect’ that, when in Britain, will be scorched no more:

Britannia, whose new name makes all tongues sing,
 Might be a diamant worthy to inchase 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 Æthiop, and revive a corse.
 His light sciential is, and, past mere nature,
 Can salve the rude defects of every creature.
 Call forth thy honor'd 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 scorch'd no more:
 This sun is temperate, and refine
 All things on which his radiance shines.²⁹

The main purpose of *The Masque of Blackness* was to show the transformative powers of the Monarch. In the masque, James I is the Sun King, and to represent his radiance and transformative powers the audience must visually witness the metamorphosis of the nymphs. James Loxley describes how ‘light is his currency, and sudden illumination the means by which his force is registered’.³⁰ The use of black makeup for the Queen and her ladies is multi-faceted, especially when it is discussed with

²⁵ Orgel, p.17.

²⁶ Orgel, p.37.

²⁷ Orgel, p.36.

²⁸ Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblems* (London: Lovell Reeve, 1866), p.57.

²⁹ Jonson, pp.320–321.

³⁰ Loxley, p.119.

regards to the developing notion that black Africans were ‘sub-human’. The negative connotation of one skin colour as inferior is apparent in the masque; however, the intention to use this to consciously represent Africans in a malicious fashion is less apparent. It could be argued that it is an effective means of using juxtaposition to represent the King, and Britain, as the superior nation, not only to Africa, but also to Europe. Indeed, the nymphs dismiss Aquitania (France) and Lusitania (Portugal) in their search for the ideal country. The nymphs in *The Masque of Blackness* are also dressed in ‘regal’, albeit and bright mantle; his front, neck and wrists adorned with pearls; and crowned with an artificial wreath of caine and paper-rush’.³¹ Authenticity was not the intended purpose behind Inigo Jones’ designs since he based the costumes on fashions he had seen while visiting Italy, as well as in Cesare Vecellio’s costume books.³² While not dressed in obvious Western fashions, the characters from Niger were fantastical, clothing; their father Niger is dressed in a ‘blue dressed in finery, indicating their high status (figure 4). It is also known that some structural elements of Jonson’s masques would have been dictated



Figure 4. Inigo Jones, *Daughter of Niger*, 1605, watercolour on paper.

Reproduced with the permission of the Chatsworth Collection.

³¹ Jonson, p.315.

³² Martin Butler, *The Court Masque* (2012),

<http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/k/essays/court_msq_essay/3/> [accessed 04 Feb 2018].

to him by members of the royal household.³³ Indeed, Anne of Denmark did have an African footman who was represented in Paul van Somer's 1617 portrait. Therefore, it is possible that the use of black makeup was suggested by the Queen, or perhaps that the intent was rather more focused on effect than outright xenophobia.

However, even if the use of black makeup could be dismissed as just an effective use of special effects, and the intention considered to be something other than to simply represent Africans as 'sub-human', the reaction that the masque provoked in individuals such as Dudley Carleton does indeed demonstrate a contemporary disposition towards Africans. Even though the Inigo Jones' designs reveal the costumes to be regal, the appearance of the women in black makeup was considered 'loathsome'. It is from the response of Carleton that we can best gauge the effect that seeing white women wearing black makeup had on contemporary audiences. Indeed, the wearing of black makeup seemingly had a negative visual effect. Virginia Mason Vaughan commented that:

Once the actor donned the mask of a black Moor or a black devil, the face's emotional range was static. The actor could adopt a variety of poses in hopes that body language would convey different attitudes, but the scope of emotion was more limited than what could be conveyed through facial expressions.³⁴

Beginning with Sir John Hawkins' coat of arms, the visual representation of blackness as being indicative of a 'sub-human' nature was to become further standardised throughout English visual culture. For example, in 1636, the little-known masque *Mr Moore's Revels* again utilises black makeup; however, its use this time directly linked Africans and apes. Interestingly, Matthieu Chapman argues that *Mr. Moore's Revels*, while also being the first play to represent black Africans and Moorish people on the same stage, is the first play to separate blacks from Moors structurally, representing the Moors as civilised, while classing Africans in the same category as apes.³⁵ We see this categorisation regularly after the seventeenth century, and it is arguable that this did not change until mid-way through the twentieth century. Certainly, the callousness that developed, partly through ignorance and partly motivated by financial gain, permeated English visual culture, justifying the country's role in the slave trade and standardising the notion that black skin was 'sub-human'.

³³ Leah Marcus, "'Present Occasions'" and the Shaping of Ben Jonson's Masques.' *ELH*, 45.2 (1978) pp. 201–225 (p.201).

³⁴ Virginia Mason Vaughn, *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.10.

³⁵ Chapman, p.92.

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