

FOREWORD

The argument that unfolds throughout this thesis represents the development of my own understanding of the Renaissance conception and application of alchemical theories and philosophies, especially as it applies to my appreciation of the works of two of the crucial figures of the period – Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. These men were far more than entertainers. They were committed to their art as an essential component in the shaping and maintenance of the societal conscience. As dramatist-philosophers, they not only treated issues of topical interest and debate around the individual in relation to individual, and the individual in relation to the larger worlds of nature and politics, but also provided learned and insightful comment on the possible nature and function of the individual soul/mind in relation to itself. My deepening sensitivity to and comprehension of early modern alchemical philosophies and practices as apt analogies for psychological development led me to believe that Jonson and Shakespeare, separately though similarly, externalized, or dramatized, the inner trajectory of self-knowledge.

This thesis, then, represents my own exploratory expedition into Renaissance epistemological thought as embodied in various alchemical texts, and each chapter reflects my growing understanding of the correlations between alchemy and early modern psychologies. I have also attempted to follow the practices, albeit loosely, of alchemical writers of this era. The first two chapters, therefore, may be read within the tradition of the prefatory apologetics, which characterises many alchemical writings. The subsequent argument is thus based on the principles established in these opening chapters, wherein I provide both a historical and an intellectual context for my proposal of a Renaissance psychology.

Chapter Three focuses on Renaissance conceptions of epistemology. The classical dictum of *nosce teipsum* is explored in relation to a range of contemporary alchemical arguments about the nature of philosophy and knowledge. In Chapter Four, I present

a proposal of a Renaissance ‘model’ of psychological development, which may be seen to be analogous to the alchemical process as widely understood and depicted in the literature of the time. I have conceived of the fifth chapter as a ‘bridge’ between the foregoing thesis and the expository analysis of two contemporaneous, though significantly different, dramatic texts. I have argued here for a re-evaluation of Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* in relation to current alchemical theories and philosophies with which Jonson was obviously *au fait*. I have also suggested that a nuanced understanding is forfeited if one fails to take into account the store of ‘common intellectual property’ from which Jonson drew in both his dramatic and non-dramatic works. Chapter Five thus particularizes the foregoing argument and attempts to come to some apprehension of Jonson’s individual conception of self-knowledge and psychological development. The sixth chapter demonstrates this apprehension in relation to Jonson’s *The Alchemist*.

If one were to categorise the methodological approach in this chapter, it would probably be closest to a ‘new historicist’ reading of the plays. According to M.H. Abrams:

New historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of [a text’s] production, its meanings, its effects, and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations ... [New historicists] conceive of a literary text as ‘situated’ within the institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the overall culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text interacts as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes (183).

In his introduction to *Learning to Curse*, Stephen Greenblatt asks the question: “[Is] new historicism a completely empty term, its relative success due entirely to the felicitous conjunction of two marketable signs: ‘new’ and ‘ism?’” He offers a negative

though qualified answer to his own question: “I think not, though it will not do to exaggerate its coherence”. Drawing on “one of the best new historicist critics”, Louis A Montrose, Greenblatt explains that new historicism “describes less a set of beliefs ... [than] ‘the historicity of texts and the textuality of history’” (3). I hope to demonstrate in the final two chapters of this thesis that both *The Alchemist* and *The Tempest* draw on anecdotal material: the current concerns about social, political and physical well-being, and the ambivalent attitudes surrounding the ‘voyages of discovery’. These contemporary narratives seem to coincide with Joel Fineman’s definition of the nature of the anecdote which “determines the destiny of a specifically historiographic integration of event and context” (49).

For the most part, I have found this approach most tolerant of and sympathetic to the primary material, both literary and alchemical. It allows for an unencumbered exploration of the correlations and interactions between various strands of thought without imposing a possibly anachronistic interpretive structure on the works of the period.

Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is thus seen as being in direct conversation with both Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, and with the philosophical and artistic trends of the period. This approach is endorsed by Greenblatt’s assertion that “Virtually every form of aesthetic pleasure – and this is particularly true of theatrical pleasure – is located in an intermediate zone of social transaction, a betwixt and between”. He further explains that “It is this mobility, a mobility that includes the power of ready mutation, rather than disinterestedness or stability, that enables the pleasures provoked by certain works of art to seem to endure unchanged for centuries” (11). In Chapter Seven, I explore the evidence that Shakespeare was drawing from a ‘common pool’ of intellectual material with Jonson. However, I also suggest that Shakespeare presents a differing, though in some ways complementary, view of self-knowledge. Both Shakespeare and Jonson, I propose, are drawing on alchemical language and imagery

to present contrasting characterizations of human potential and evolution. In effect, the respective dramatic texts present two distinct conceptualizations of the 'philosopher's stone', which, in turn, suggests two models of human perfectibility that seem to be poles apart. These two works, however, are undeniably related and mutually effective within the Renaissance crucible of alchemy.