

CHAPTER FIVE

The Alchemy of Ben Jonson

Introduction

In the foregoing chapters I have offered evidence that alchemy was considered a noble and credible field of study by many of the foremost Renaissance scholars and philosophers. I will argue in this chapter that, given Ben Jonson's own pronouncements on the nature and value of reading and learning, it is almost impossible to trivialise or dismiss his use of alchemy as the informing philosophical precept and structural imperative of *The Alchemist*. To do this, I shall engage with Robert Evans's examination of Jonson's reading and marginalia, always keeping in mind that Jonson's was a complex and ambiguous personality. It is therefore necessary to take into consideration evidence garnered from various sources, while assessing this evidence with the same subtlety and shrewdness that Jonson himself applied to his reading and writing. I will then proceed to a reading of the play itself to substantiate and illustrate my proposal that alchemy was far more than a convenient figure for Jonson's most popular comedy. I will thus attempt to show that while Jonson overtly satirises alchemy as fraudulent and deceptive, he nevertheless covertly affirms the alchemical goal of transformation on various levels.

Firstly, I will investigate Jonson's commitment to what he perceives as the artist's responsibility towards society. Especially I will focus on this commitment as it embodies his philosophy of writing as a creative and creating act. In other words, the act of writing is itself a specific kind of 'alchemical' transformation of discrete 'base' elements into the complete and 'perfect' artistic philosopher's stone – the drama. Secondly, in *The Alchemist* Jonson

seems to apply a type of ‘linguistic alchemy’, particularly in relation to the internal dynamics of the play. Finally, in his presentation of different characters, Jonson artfully though indirectly subverts the Christian humanist ideal of perfectibility. Instead of suggesting characters who develop towards the quintessential humanist archetype of knowledge-as-virtue, he offers a perspective on Machiavellian utilitarianism – knowledge-as-power – which encompasses a shrewd and unromanticised assessment of both oneself and others. Jonson delineates an alchemically ‘transmuted’ pseudo-Adamic figure. This ‘perfected’ man not only apprehends himself and the world around him, but can also utilize this knowledge to assess accurately the conditions necessary for the purposes of survival and self-promotion. I will refer to two non-dramatic Jonsonian texts – the *Discoveries* and William Drummond’s ‘biographical’ *Conversations* – to illustrate what I perceive to be Jonson’s alchemical quest to raise individual awareness and to realise social transformation, by bringing audiences hard up against reality, or, in other words, ‘life as it is’.

To conclude this chapter, I will adopt the role of devil’s advocate. I will argue that while I am convinced that Jonson, at some levels, endorses alchemical philosophies, his own ideologies, often expressed quite vehemently and sometimes intolerantly in the two abovementioned non-dramatic texts, tinge and limit his view and acceptance of alchemy as a whole. This kind of paradox is not exceptional. As Haydn points out, “It is not unusual to find a strident, even bawling, reformer taking evident pleasure in the depiction of the very vices which he most condemns” (6). Moreover, in comparing Jonson’s *The Alchemist* and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* within the context of the Renaissance conception of alchemy, I have become more and more convinced that while

Jonson's play sets forth a largely pessimistic and resigned – some would say realistic – appreciation of the human situation, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, on the whole, offers a more hopeful outlook on the possible fate of humanity. In the following chapter, I will more fully explore this last point.

Will the 'real' Ben Jonson please stand up?

In *Habits of Mind*, Robert Evans states that “The marked books ... selected for discussion are a deliberately mixed lot” (12). However, his selection seems to have been carefully predetermined by an intention to present a specific image of Jonson – as learned; intellectually curious and catholic, yet mentally rigorous; morally uncompromising and settled; and psychologically integrated. Evans, however, is not the only critic to offer a neat and rounded characterization of Ben Jonson. According to Ian Donaldson, this particular portrayal of Jonson may be traced back to the Herford and Simpson edition of Jonson's works, which for a very long time was seen to offer the most authoritative insights into his life and career:

The personality of Ben Jonson which they [Herford and Simpson] invoke is coherent, stable, singular, and sharply defined ... the 'Jonsonian personality' that is invoked is in every sense a continuum ... No attempt is made to distinguish between Jonson's own tactical declarations of personal constancy and imperturbability, and the actual shifts, transformations, experiments, back-trackings, and inconsistencies which might be revealed by a closer scrutiny of his work as a whole (27).

Although some of the characterizations put forward by Evans in *Habits of Mind* are evidently valid, there are instances in which his depiction seems to consider only a limited aspect of Jonson's personality. I believe that a more liberal and accommodating consideration of alternative aspects may enrich our understanding of the man and his work. By all accounts, Jonson was a complicated character, never fully at ease with either himself or with his society. In this Jonson was not unique. It has been established in earlier chapters that this was an age of upheaval and restlessness. Haydn explains how the literature of a period inevitably mirrors the intellectual and social currents that shape a particular historical milieu:

[In] an optimistic period, one dominated by a single world-view, literature is apt to embody this largely consistent orthodoxy in a defense of the *status quo*.... Conversely, in an age of intellectual unrest and disenchantment, there is likely to be a corresponding literature, emphasising the wide gap between the ideal and the actual. And such a preponderance of the second kind of theme in the Counter-Renaissance is one of the clearest indications of its transitional nature, its wasteland character of scepticism and uncertainty, coming as it does between two highly confident and secure world-views (229).

Jonson seems to have been undeniably affected by the prevailing 'disenchantment' and 'scepticism' of the time.¹ Notwithstanding the probable

¹ Wayne Shumaker's strategy for interpretation is particularly helpful in understanding the nature of Jonson's writing. He counsels that: "[It] is impossible to prescribe either an invariable mode of investigation or a set of criteria for the judgement of evidence. The most that can be done is to suggest a set of flexible guidelines.... In theory, a better procedure is to search not for influences *from* but for influences *on* – in other words, to speculate where a given writer's ideas came from, not what effect his ideas produced on others" ('Literary Hermeticism', 295).

distortions of personal prejudice,² one has to acknowledge William Drummond's digest of Jonson as an interesting contemporary comment on the man, and one which serves to qualify Evans's depiction:

He is a great lover and praiser of himself, a contemner and scorner of others, given rather to lose a friend than a jest, jealous of every word and action of those about him (especially after drink, which is one of the elements in which he liveth), a dissembler of ill parts which reign in him, a bragger of some good that he wanteth, thinketh nothing well but what either he himself or some of his friends and countrymen hath said or done. He is passionately kind and angry, careless either to gain or keep, vindictive, but, if he be well answered, at himself (*Oxford Authors*, 610-611).

Notwithstanding Drummond's account, I believe that there is ample evidence to support Evans's view that "[Jonson's] determined self-education was part and parcel of his whole effort at self-assertion; [that] reading was not an escape from the 'real world' but a means of self-fashioning and self-preparation for involvement in that world" (24). James P. Bednarz makes a similar point, arguing that

Jonson's autobiographical personae are interesting not only in themselves as symbolic acts of self-fashioning, but also as the first examples in the history of English drama of a playwright self-consciously

² It is significant that Drummond had no apparent intention to publish his notes on Jonson, as the *Conversations* were only published after Drummond's death and more than a decade after Jonson's renowned walking tour to Scotland.

defending his status and explicitly defining the literary principles upon which his art is based (3).

The above provides a portrait of Jonson as a complex, if not chaotic, personality. More than only being a manifestation of intellectual integrity and self-assertion, his intensive scholarly pursuits may also be seen to be an indication of intellectual insecurity, resulting from a restless and unfulfilled quest for self-knowledge that would inform and shape both his sense of self and of the world around him.

Donaldson makes more or less the same point in his discussion of the significance of the recurring motif of the circle in Jonson's work, seeming to symbolize a sense of completion, wholeness, and inviolable cohesion. This reading accords with Ralph's exposition of the Renaissance conception of 'circularity', in which:

[A]ll matter, including living creatures, was acted upon, through intermediate agencies, by the outer Intelligences, which in turn were directed by God the absolute Being, perfect Intelligence, and First Cause. Man could comprehend the universe, it was held, because the universe is rational, orderly, and perfectly circular, and therefore amenable to the reasoning faculty implanted in man. But understanding depended on a process of deduction, inference, and analogy. Man could know God only through the observed effects of His subordinate agents (210-211).

However, even given this understanding of the circular motion of knowledge, Donaldson goes on to caution that Jonson's conception of circularity was somewhat qualified, especially in relation to the contemporary emphasis on 'roundedness' and perfectibility. Thus:

It is tempting to assume that the circularity about which Jonson writes so constantly ... relates in some way to the movement of his own life and the shape of his career.... Because Jonson asserts so often this notion of the round and gathered self, it seems almost as if his own integrated character is waiting there on the page (29-30).

Even more telling than the probable symbolism of the reiterated figure of the circle in Jonson's work, is his adoption of a circle, or compass, for his personal emblem.³ However, as Donaldson indicates, Jonson's choice was far more complicated, and also more revealing, than it may appear at first glance. While the circle was a common classical and Renaissance signification of wholeness and perfection, this was an idealization of something that was never or very rarely realized in the 'real' world. In Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, Milton links the notion of circularity with the perfection of God's creation of the world:

Then stayed the fervid wheels, and in his hand
He took the golden compasses, prepared
In God's eternal store, to circumscribe
This universe, and all created things:
One foot he centred, and the other turned
Round through the vast profundity obscure,

³ See a copy of Jonson's *impresa* of the 'broken compass' on the title page to the following chapter.

And said, Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds,
This be thy just circumference, O world.

(lines 224-231).

In his *Platonic Theology*, Marsilio Ficino presents an impressive exposition of his theory of circularity, which, he suggests, is analogous to self-reflective knowledge. This kind of knowledge resides in the soul, which “imitates the most perfect figure ... the circular motion” (245).⁴ Like unending ripples in a pond, the circle extends beyond itself, though it always returns to and starts from its own centre:

If this is so, it [the soul] must be aware of itself and what it contains in itself. If it is aware, it must know. But it knows by understanding as long as it recognises its essence as spiritual and free from the limitations of matter. For it is knowledge of such which is called understanding. We can see in our own case that knowledge is nothing other than spiritual union with some spiritual form.... Our mind too, having been joined by our spiritual power with the incorporeal species and reasons of things, understands objects themselves. Similarly, when the third essence ... is joined to itself, it knows and understands itself by becoming aware of itself in a spiritual way. It also understands things divine, to which it clings as closely as possible in a spiritual way, and it understands things corporeal, to which by nature it also descends. It knows, I say, by a discursive process over time, since through its activity it is mobile (245).

⁴ Bouwsma’s reflections on ‘The Liberation of the Self’ serve to clarify this notion of the perfection of the circle: “The heavenly bodies, themselves perfect and therefore immutable, were seen as arranged in a hierarchy and were believed to move in perfect circles; linear movement would have signified their ‘need’ to change place and implied some imperfection” (20).

Yet, like other philosophers, Ficino was proffering a theory, rather than positing an existential actuality. Ficino himself is aware of the utopian nature of his teachings, for he acknowledges that “in the sphere of moral philosophy one must purify the soul until its eye becomes unclouded and it can see the divine light and worship God” (9). Cesare Vasoli contextualises Ficino’s assertion, explaining that “[Ficino’s] *sapientia* was linked to the notion of a revelation transmitted from the ancients by a chain of inspired thinkers until it achieved a final synthesis in Christian dogma” (‘Renaissance Concept of Philosophy’, 68). Of course, this ‘synthesis’ remained to a large extent an elusive ideal.

However, while Ficino might be styled an idealist, there were many others, including Montaigne, Machiavelli, and Agrippa, who stressed “the discrepancy between the ideal formulated by theory and the actuality they observed themselves, [and which] demanded a different approach to truth and certainty” (Haydn, 84). Jonson seems to belong to this school of scepticism. His choice of emblem embodies the disjuncture between the real and the unrealistically optimistic, because his badge is very suggestively a *broken* compass. Thus Donaldson points out:

The emblem and its motto serve as reminders of the unattainability of those qualities of closure, integrity, and perfection which Jonson simultaneously celebrates and asserts. The gap in the circumference of the circle is the gap between longing and fulfilment, between the ideal and the actuality (31).

Bouwsma provides a helpful perspective on the particular context in which Jonson was working, and out of which he made his choice of emblem, observing that “A major clue [to the troubled minds of the age] can be found in one of its greatest glories: its importance for theatre, the most popular of the arts, which brings into focus a profound set of discontents released by the peculiar freedoms of Renaissance culture” (129).

Jonson's use of Alchemy

Perhaps this background helps us to a better understanding of Jonson's use of alchemy as a trope for a society characterised by perplexing, often disorienting, change and upheaval. It is significant that Jonson was evidently well-informed about the intricacies of alchemical language and practice. One might assume that Jonson accumulated his impressive knowledge through extensive and critical reading, suggesting a far more complex and heterogeneous personality than the single-minded citizen portrayed by some critics and biographers. As Donaldson avers, there is a significant and dynamic paradox that exists between what Jonson professed, and that which obviously held a riveting fascination for him and provided stimuli for his work. It is this incongruity that reveals “a very different Ben Jonson, more fractured in temperament and conduct, more experimental, various, and digressive in his creative processes” (49-50).

Given the above, one could then deduce that the frequent recurrence of the theme of alchemy in his works, whether overt or allegorical, is evidence of Jonson's deep interest in this subject at both a personal and a creative level, especially where it might suggest an *angst* that is not out of keeping with the

spirit of the age. It might also allow one to argue for a reading of Jonson's work that accepts and celebrates the anti-romantic man and artist

Alchemy and Creation

An example of Jonson's searching creativity may be found in his distinctive marginalia in a Latin edition of the Bible.⁵ Although Evans carefully notes Jonson's marking of the account of Creation in the book of Genesis, he offers no suggestion about the possible import of Jonson's interest in this subject other than to remark, almost in passing, that "The first marks, naturally enough, focus on the creation" (48). One could argue, I suppose, that Jonson's marks reveal an exegetical, even literary, interest in the Scriptural text. Yet, given Jonson's interest in things theoretical and philosophical, one might also see in these marks an indication of an engagement – even if only academic – with the theories surrounding the biblical account of creation. One of the current theories put forward was that creation was an alchemical act, with God as archetypal alchemist.⁶

Cherry Gilchrist argues that genuine alchemists throughout the ages "aspired to knowledge of creation and universal order" (4). This is in keeping with Haydn's observation of the "extent [to which] esoteric dogma could penetrate – or, at least, did parallel – Renaissance 'Christian' expositions of *Genesis*" (180). Many

⁵ Although Jonson does not provide written commentary, he employs a rather intricate and idiosyncratic code of symbols, drawings and underlining, as may be seen from the texts housed in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington DC.

⁶ Paracelsus is unapologetic in his assertion of this belief in God as alpha-chemist: "He most exactly knows and sees, since it is he who has created all things. We will, therefore, take him to be our Master, Operator, and Leader into this most true art [alchemy]. We will, therefore, imitate him alone, and through him learn and attain to the knowledge of that Nature which he himself, with his own finger, has engraved and inscribed in the bodies of these metals" (*Archidoxes*, 1).

alchemists emphasised that the initial divine act of creation was in fact an alchemical act of separation, in which God not only divided the chaotic and unformed mass, or *massa confusa*, into the heavenly and earthly spheres, but also separated and distinguished the various components of both realms. Again, *Paradise Lost* affords us insight into the early modern conceptions of both alchemy and creation. In reply to Adam's request for knowledge of the creation, the angel Gabriel explains:

Let there be light, said God, and forthwith light
 Ethereal, first of things, quintessence pure
 Sprung from the deep....

... God saw the light was good;
 And light from darkness by the hemisphere
 Divided: light the day, and darkness night
 He named....

...
 Again, God said, Let there be firmament
 Amid the waters, and let it divide
 The waters from the waters: and God made
 The firmament, expanse of liquid, pure,
 Transparent, elemental air, diffused
 In circuit to the uttermost convex
 Of this great round: partition firm and sure,
 The waters underneath from those above
 Dividing.

(Book VII, 243-269).

Lawrence Principe thus notes that “Many writers [literary and alchemical] believed or *expected* that alchemical processes should show similitudes to the greater processes of Creation” (190). The alchemical philosophers insisted that penetration of these divine mysteries was at the heart of their endeavours, for knowledge of the first and greatest alchemical operation would almost certainly ensure success in their own derivative and subordinate labours. In his *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon thus defines magic – which, in this context, would include the alchemical art – as “the science which applies the knowledge of hidden forms to the production of wonderful operations; and by uniting ... actives with passives, displays the wonderful works of nature” (*Works*, 366-67). Given his grasp of alchemical terminology and symbolism, it is unlikely that Jonson could have been ignorant of this aspect of the Great Work as a repository of arcane knowledge. Indeed, alchemy might even have offered a possible framework for exploring one of Jonson’s abiding concerns about the nature and function of knowledge. He laments: “I know of no disease of the soul but ignorance: not of the arts or sciences, but of itself” (543). This, and other passages, seem to suggest that Jonson engaged with the epistemological debate discussed in the previous chapter.

In his quest for knowledge, Jonson appears to assay his own role as creative adept, drawing on the full range of the arts and sciences as possible entry points, for he accepts that both are means to a fuller understanding of man’s place within the universal scheme of things. Gilchrist’s observation is applicable here as she points out that “During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was an eagerness among men of learning to gather the strands of study together, to compare and synthesise the arts, sciences, and systems of occult and divine knowledge” (4).

Gareth Roberts's introduction to this topic in *The Mirror of Alchemy* may be seen as a development of Gilchrist's statement:

If we believe the alchemists themselves, their art had an antiquity literally as old as Adam.... For the sixteenth-century followers of the Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus (c. 1493-1541), creation itself was an event in which 'the great workemaister and Creator' distinguished light and darkness, and more especially divided first the firmament and then dry land from the waters in divine acts of alchemical separation.... In Eden before the Fall Adam was thought to have possessed an unique knowledge of the wonderful secrets of nature, including that of the Philosophers' Stone.... This made him the first and most knowledgeable alchemical adept (13).

This understanding of the correlations between alchemy and creation, which was widely accepted by even the most learned scholars of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, provides one way of making sense of Jonson's marginalia, on the book of Genesis. This link problematises our usually far too eager dismissal of the words Jonson puts into the mouth of one of the central characters in *The Alchemist*. In fact, Jonson's own awareness of this alchemy/creation theory is vocalized, even if obliquely, by Sir Epicure Mammon, when he enquires irritably of Surly:

Will you believe antiquity? Records?
I'll shew you a book where Moses and his sister,
And Solomon have written, of the art;
Ay, and a treatise penn'd by Adam.

(II.i.80-83).

Jonson's 'Politics'

A related, if tangential, issue – further evidence of Jonson's extensive range of interest – is suggested by Evans's point that Jonson's reading and writing were “political acts” (38).⁷ In light of his wide reading⁸ and his engagement with socio-political issues of his day, it seems likely that Jonson would have taken an interest in Machiavelli, probably the most widely read and talked about – without a doubt the most controversial – political commentator at the time. Perhaps unwittingly courting notoriety through his outspokenness, Machiavelli was marginalized by many Christian humanist philosophers and writers. The humanists emphasised the ideal of human perfectibility by attempting to persuade their readers to follow a regimen of self-improvement and so to accelerate the ushering in of a Golden Era of good and truth. Machiavelli, on the other hand, tended to concentrate not on how things may possibly be in a future Golden Age, but on the practical and unavoidable reality of the here and now. Ralph expresses the distinction quite eloquently:

Humanist scholars were endeavouring to reveal man's potentialities for a fuller and more satisfying existence.... *The Prince*, however, reflects a startlingly pessimistic view of human nature. It offers one of the most caustic appraisals of man ever to win a permanent place in the libraries of the world (23).

⁷ Bednarz contextualises these ‘political acts’, suggesting that “Jonson's program was political insofar as he sought to formulate a notion of poetic authority that would ground his social status along with that of the class of writers he represented ... [and is manifested in] his struggle to establish a social identity through writing to assert his personal power in a social setting he often found inimical to his interests” (17).

⁸ Evans scrupulously traces much of Jonson's politics to various influences of Seneca, Thomas More, Justus Lipsius, and Caesar, amongst others (38).

Machiavelli's views thus challenged many of the contemporary ideas and contradicted them in many crucial respects. Despite Machiavelli's ostracism in England as "the devil incarnate" by the then archbishop of Canterbury, it is extremely likely that Jonson would have been actively engaged with the controversial works of the Italian writer, works that had a fundamental and widespread impact throughout Europe (Boughner, 73).⁹ According to George Parfitt, Jonson not only read Machiavelli, but also "grasped more of what the Italian was about than most of his contemporaries" (30).

Of course, this is difficult to assess with any real certainty. But in the light of Jonson's mode of reading, borne out by his own explicit references in the *Discoveries* and substantiated by Evans's detailed work, Parfitt's speculation is probably quite close to the mark. Daniel C. Boughner, in his book *The Devil's Disciple: Jonson's Debt to Machiavelli*, not only argues that Jonson was influenced by Machiavelli's critical and dramatic works in his own creative enterprises, but also asserts that Jonson was "well known early in his career as 'Monsieur Machiavelli'". Boughner suggests that "The close relationship invites the conclusion that if Machiavelli was the devil, then Jonson was the devil's disciple" (74). He offers convincing evidence – which will be discussed in more detail – for Jonson's debt to Machiavelli.

For the moment, it is enough to propose that the sort of fixed ethical and political conviction that Evans ascribes to Jonson is somewhat discordant in relation to Jonson's wide-eyed acknowledgement of the frailties of human beings existing in a world without an absolute moral order. In interpreting Jonson's marking of a text by Seneca, Evans remarks that "Both [writers]

⁹ Bouwsma points out that "even for his critics Machiavelli remained pivotal" (221).

celebrate disinterested virtue.... Both emphasized the strong connections between private virtues and public morality, and ethics is perhaps the central preoccupation of both men's writings" (59). However, Evans fails to consider that Jonson's concern with ethics and morality may be more an ever-changing process of exploration than a settled conviction about the rightness of his stance. Parfitt makes the point that "Jonson's work is best seen as a continuing struggle to come to terms with the gaps between what his ideals tell us about the society he wished to see and what his sensitivity to what was actually going on indicated about what society really was or was becoming" (146). This assessment seems to place Jonson in the same, or a similar, camp as Machiavelli and other 'realists' of the period. Parfitt's interpretation of Jonson's work thus accords with Haydn's view that "perhaps no other single characteristic of the Counter-Renaissance has so extensive an elaboration in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century literature as the pragmatic emphasis of its empiricists upon the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual" (227). Haydn goes on to explain that this empirical or realist attitude

rejects altogether the possibility of any realization of the ideal, which it completely divorces from the actual. On the one hand, it sees what ought to be, compounded of theory, hypothesis and fancy; and on the other, what is, consisting of practice, observation and fact. It either denies any reality to the former, or at least any value relevant to the living of life; it acknowledges the world of experience alone as real. Hence it distrusts intellectual knowledge and relies upon a radical empiricism (228).

But this was not the exclusive domain of political writers and social critics. Rather, as Haydn insists, the motifs of the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual, and between appearance and reality, are treated extensively in the “major imaginative literature of the period” (228). While Jonson is certainly a significant contributor to this category, a telling example of his honest appraisal of the world as it really is, rather than as it ought to be, is found in the *Discoveries*, where his invective bespeaks a deep disillusionment:

But it is the disease of the age; and no wonder if the world, growing old, begins to be infirm; old age itself is a disease. It is long since the sick world began to dote and talk idly; would she had but doted still! but her dotage is now broke forth into a madness, and become a mere frenzy (530).

Jonson’s reading indicates a state of incessant uncertainty and a sustained process of interrogation, neither of which ever really reached satisfactory closure in Jonson’s life. And it this aspect of the ‘broken compass’ which I want to suggest underlies and informs Jonson’s *The Alchemist*.

Drama as Alchemy

The correlation between the stages of dramatic production and the alchemical process has long been recognised and exploited by both writers and critics,¹⁰ not least of which was Ben Jonson, who happens to fall into both categories. The associations between alchemical philosophies and practices and Jonson's application of his own art may at first seem to be few, but the overlaps are significant and have a particular bearing on Jonson's use of alchemical terms and imagery in *The Alchemist*.

For one thing, the idea of transformation from the base to the pure, which is the underlying principle and purpose of true alchemy, is clearly expressed by Jonson in the *Discoveries*. Here he states that one of the characteristics of the wise and elegant orator or writer is to "redeem arts from the rough and braky seats where they lay hid and overgrown with thorns, to a pure, open, and flowery light, where they may take the eye, and be taken by the hand" (lines 122-125). The sincere and unaffected artist, therefore, had the task of excavating hidden truths and revealing these truths to those who were willing to be enlightened. Jonson certainly counted himself amongst the number of true artists who could shape the world through artistic, especially literary, representation. Consequently, as Bednarz proposes, "Motivated by the humanist ideal of a theatre of social transformation, Jonson originated a satiric form that embodied what G.K. Hunter has described as 'an insistence on

¹⁰ Frances Yates convincingly argues for the associations between alchemy and drama during the Renaissance in her book *Theatre of the World*, in which she asserts that "the history of the Renaissance theatre [is] to be enriched through contact with the history of Renaissance scientific and magical thought" (1969, xiii). Bettina Knapp also explores the correlations between the developmental processes of alchemy and drama in her book, *Theatre and Alchemy*.

judgement” (55). In relation to the idea of theatre as transforming agent, Vaclav Havel writes that

[Theatre] is an organism of society and its time, necessarily influenced by everything that influences them. It is a confluence of their currents – be they ever so hidden. Like it or not, theatre is always more or less connected to everything by which the ‘collective spirit’ lives – to its hidden and open themes, its dilemmas, to the existential questions that manifest themselves to it or as it manifests them, to the sensibility, the emotivity of the age, its moods, its thought and expression, its gestures, its visual sensibilities, its lifestyle, [its] fashion (*Letters to Olga*, 250).

Referring specifically to *The Alchemist*, Stanton Linden recognises that the alchemical trope in this play “serves ... as a *potential* source of illumination as well as a vehicle for satiric attack and high comedy” (120). Jonson’s artistic ideal of enlightening and corrective drama echoes the alchemists’ endeavours to ‘redeem’ that which is pure and perfect from the temporal and material constraints of nature. This might seem a rather affected aspiration, elevating theatre to a position almost of religion. However, as Bouwsma explains:

[P]lays often provide rather complicated kinds of entertainment. Many people, in the long run at any rate and certainly in the Renaissance, wanted more than entertainment or, to put it somewhat differently, they valued entertainment that also stuck in the memory, incited sympathy and admiration, inspired awe and wonder, at the very least related to their own lives and gave insights of various kinds into the human

condition.... Theatre taught about the world and how to display oneself in it (131-132).

But theatre is a world of make-believe and analogy, and the lessons it teaches can only be learnt by looking beyond the spectacle and play-acting. This practice of shrouding the truth behind cryptic curtains and plots parallels the alchemists' convention of concealment. The alchemical adepts continually justified their right to protect their truths from the ignorant and ignoble by shrouding both the theoretical and practical aspects of their art in the mists of arcane figures. Ben Jonson seems similarly to advocate that there is knowledge which is available only to an elect cognoscenti. He states that "There is a more secret cause; and the power of liberal studies lies more hid than that it can be wrought out by profane wits" (*Discoveries*, lines 170-172).

However, Jonson does not confine his elect to philosophers, priests, or political rulers. He sets out the characteristics of those who are awarded access to the knowledge of the ages:

I could never think the study of wisdom confined only to the philosopher, or of piety to the divine, or of state to the politic. But that he which can feign a commonwealth, which is the poet, can govern it with counsels, strengthen it with laws, correct it with judgements, inform it with religion and morals, is all these. We do not require in him mere elocution, or an excellent faculty in verse, but the exact knowledge of all virtues and their contraries; with the ability to render the one loved, the other hated, by his proper embattling them (*Discoveries*, lines 1043-1052).

Like the alchemists, who believed that they were partners with God in a continuing process of creation and perfection, Jonson held firm to the conviction that the playwright and poet – terms which he often conflates¹¹ – had a vital role to play in the reform and refinement of individuals, society, and the larger world through the medium of dramatic writing.¹² Helena Watts Baum sums it up well when she states that:

Jonson accepted without reservation the broad and inclusive Renaissance theory of the high function of the poet in society.... The poet he thought was a man of great intellectual and moral attainments, able to purify and interpret all knowledge. Poetry was the eternal voice of men's best visions and acted positively and directly upon society as the most powerful force for its betterment. Dramatic poetry he practiced with a keen sense of his responsibility (184).

Calling on the authority of classical writers to reinforce his advocacy of the eminence of the artist in society, Jonson asserts:

[T]o nature, exercise, imitation, and study, art must be added, to make all these perfect. And though these challenge to themselves much in the making up of our maker, it is art only can lead him to perfection, and leave him there in possession, as planted by her hand. It is the assertion of Tully, if to an excellent nature there happen an accession or conformation of learning and discipline, there will then remain

¹¹ Baum notes that Jonson “uses the word ‘poet’ interchangeably with ‘comic poet’ and ‘playwright’”. (22)

¹² Bouwsma explains that “Theatre also met various needs of individual life. Thus it analysed and helped its audiences to understand the tensions between individual consciences and traditional values. It could also aid reflection about the slippage between social role and the ‘true self’ implicit in the daily life of Renaissance society” (134).

somewhat noble and singular. For as Simylus saith in Stobaeus, ... without art, nature can never be perfect; and without nature, art can claim no being (*Discoveries*, lines 2515-2528).

This appreciation of the symbiotic relationship between art and nature is reinforced in many alchemical writings. In his exposition on ‘The True Artist’, John Cotta explains:

[U]pon the principles of nature stand everlastingly founded all arts & sciences. For science is the faithfull and truly studied apprehension of the mind, of the never deceiving generall grounds in the generall dispensation in the nature of all things: and art is the learned and skilfull habite of imitation thereof in humane action. And all true arts thus founded upon the undeceiving grounds of nature, in themselves are ever certaine and infallible.... Nature cannot decoct, infuse, compound, mixe or prepare her rootes, mettals, or other drugs and simples, in number and nature infinite; but Art is unto her benefite and service therein accurate (117, 120).

Like many an alchemist, Jonson is rhetorically adept at presenting his argument in the most learned and, therefore, according to the principles of rhetoric, in the most convincing way possible. Once more he depends on the conferred sanction of classical philosophers to advance a possible answer to the question, “*What is a poet?*”:

A poet is that by which the Greeks is called χατ’ ἐξοχ-ήν, ὁ Ποιητής, a maker or feigner; his art, an art of imitation or feigning, expressing the

life of man in fit measure, numbers, and harmony, according to Aristotle: from the word ποιηῖν, which signifies to make or feign. Hence he is called a poet, not he which writeth in measure only, but that feigneth, and formeth a fable, and writes things like the truth. For the fable and fiction is (as it were) the form and soul of any poetical work or poem (*Discoveries*, lines 2369-2378).¹³

Art and Soul

Jonson seems here to be suggesting that art – fable, fiction, poem, and other creative works – possesses soul, or motive power,¹⁴ which may affect and inspire men to recognise and act on the truth contained therein.¹⁵ Montaigne explains how the fable is capable of touching on different aspects of knowing and being:

Most of Aesop's fables are capable of being understood and explained in several ways. They who moralize them choose some point of view which squares well with the fable, but in most cases it is only a first and

¹³ The repetition of the word 'feign' may seem to indicate that Jonson offers but faint praise for the art of the poet. This dubious interpretation is apparently reinforced by Montaigne's critique of rhetoric, which "Aristotle wisely defines ... as 'a science to persuade the people'; Socrates and Plato as 'the art of deceiving and flattering'. And they who deny the general definition verify it throughout in their precepts" ('Of the Vanity of Words', Bk I, Chap. 51, 297). However, it is helpful to contextualise Jonson's assessment in light of his vocation as poet and playwright, whose goal it is to 'feign' or simulate human life and experience towards the purpose of influencing both the movements of the soul and the behaviour of people in everyday life.

¹⁴ MacFarlane and Maclean explain that "The soul, as it was known to sixteenth century science, was first and foremost simply that which makes animate things animate" (*Montaigne*, 59). In light of the conception of a sentient universe, so widely ascribed to during this period, it is clear that almost everything – including that which 'science' might consider inanimate – was believed to be infused with 'soul'.

¹⁵ Ralph's judgement bears out this sentiment: "Far more important than the external and material changes were changes in personal and social goals, in thought and imagination – elements that, though intangible, were given expression in literature and art.... They embraced assumptions and reflected values that have been largely abandoned, not only in practice but in the realm of the imagination as well" (14-15).

superficial point of view; there are others, more alive, more essential, and more inward, to which they have not been able to penetrate: that is my case ('Of Books', Bk II, Chap. 10, 400).

He goes on to commend the poet Terence for his ability to penetrate to the heart of the matter while accommodating change and difference.¹⁶

As for the good Terence, that personification of the charm and daintiness of the Latin tongue, I think it is wonderful how he depicts to the life the motions of the soul and the manners and customs of our own day; at every turn our actions send me back to him. I cannot read him, however often, without discovering in him some new charm and beauty (401).

While Terence captures the life of the soul in his poetry, Ficino deliberates the relationship of soul, unity, truth, and art. "The light of truth", Ficino asserts, "bears the same relationship to the eye of your soul as the light of the Sun to your bodily eye.... Your mind seeks truth; but the truth does not seek itself, nor does the truth admit the false by which your mind is often deceived" (83). Ficino also holds that the soul is the mean, or intermediary, between the higher and lower levels of being, that is, between the divine and the corporeal (233). He goes on to explain that as the soul

¹⁶ This understanding of the thrust of Montaigne's lesson is substantiated by MacFarlane and Maclean, who explain that a static interpretation or application of poetry – or fable, for that matter – would be of little significance in "[Montaigne's] universe", which "is one of eternal movement and change, of indeterminacy, diversity, imperfection and incompleteness" (108). This conception of the universe is given dramatic embodiment in Jonson, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

implants itself as a whole and is not split asunder, so it withdraws as a whole and is not dispersed. And because it controls bodies while it also clings to things divine, it is the mistress of bodies.... This is the greatest miracle in nature.... Because it is the universal mean, it possesses the powers of all. If this is so, it passes into all. And since it is the true bond of everything in the universe, when it passes into some things, it does not abandon others, but it moves into individuals.... It can with justice, accordingly, be called nature's centre, the mean of everything in the universe, the succession or chain of the world, the countenance of all things, and the knot and bond of the world (243).

This exposition of the soul helps us more fully to understand Jonson's discussion of the fable or plot of a poem. It could just as well apply to the efforts of the alchemical philosophers, of which Ficino was one of the leaders, to present one of their central tenets: namely, unity, or completeness.¹⁷ This metaphysical principle is echoed in Jonson's assertion that "The fable is called the imitation of one entire and perfect action, whose parts are so joined and knit together as nothing in the structure can be changed or taken away without impairing or troubling the whole, of which there is a proportionable magnitude in the members" may be seen to be in accordance with the alchemical doctrine of concord (*Discoveries*, lines 2702-2708).

One of the most influential expounders of this doctrine was Ficino. Again in the *Platonic Theology*, he is at great pains to stress the importance of unity, not

¹⁷ This idea takes on spiritual significance in Ralph's explanation that, during the Renaissance, the material world was considered inferior to the spiritual, which was "the ultimate reality and source of all being. [Thus] the human soul – although truly spirit and therefore indestructible – was imprisoned in the body, miserably entangled in vile matter" (169). This recalls the belief of the alchemists that the Philosopher's gold was hidden within the base and reviled. However, in keeping with true alchemy, many a Renaissance philosopher held that "Man's only hope of release lay in a reunion of his soul with God" (169).

only within the realm of alchemy, but also in all expressions of creativity. He goes on to aver that human endeavours should always be in co-operation with the laws of nature, which inherently and spontaneously tend towards wholeness and balance.¹⁸ Ficino predicates his argument on the assertion that God is the ultimate source of all unity. Thus, “God is the highest of all things. Therefore God is one and simple: indeed, God is the one highest unity” (101). After a rather lengthy discussion throughout Books Two and Three, Ficino deduces that “Every work composed of several parts is at its most perfect when its members are so firmly cemented together that it becomes completely one, is consistent with and in harmony with itself, and does not easily break apart”¹⁹ (235). Ficino’s expostulation on cosmic harmony could quite easily be applied to the nature of the perfect work of art:

For the highest unity is nothing other than the highest simplicity....²⁰

For something has well being when it is united to itself and to its principle and remains pure and is not mingled with inferior things....

That the universal principle dwells in unity, truth and goodness is proved by the fact that their traces are found in all things.... Above unity

¹⁸ In his discussion of ‘Order in the Arts’, Bouwsma asserts that “The primary basis of the arts was now imitation, whether of timeless nature itself, or of the ancients who were believed to have imitated nature so successfully.... [Thus,] rules for the arts were extracted and systematized, pointing to such formal virtues as unity and coherence, balance and symmetry, precision and economy of means” (247).

¹⁹ Expounding the notion of unity, Ficino argues that “The life that is at once whole, united with itself, and not distant from itself is more pure and complete than the life that ... is pulled apart from itself.... Since the perfect always takes precedence over the imperfect, it follows that, just as the perfect things in any genus are those which are such by their very nature, so the imperfect are those which are not such” (61).

²⁰ Haydn explains the significance of ‘simplicity’ within the Renaissance paradigm: “Quite literally, this return to first principles is manifested by various kinds of cultural, technological, chronological and religious primitivism. But in addition, it takes on the large general meanings of an advocacy of simplification and simplicity, and of decentralized, unsynthesized particular experience – whether in the sense of direct personal contact with the object of knowledge, or the concentration upon one aspect of possible knowledge” (85).

nothing else exists, for nothing is more powerful than unity, since unity gives everything perfection and power (93).

Alchemy, Art, and Nature

The above argument and Baum's point concerning the poet's ability to 'purify' knowledge are especially relevant to this thesis. This view is closely related to the beliefs of the alchemists, who emphasised that their 'artistic' endeavours were in keeping with the laws of nature. Most alchemists believed in the progressive bias of nature, but this faith in the natural development towards perfection was tempered by a paradoxical conviction that, if left to itself, nature was tardy and somewhat sluggish. The role of the alchemist was to speed up the natural processes, which they could monitor through meticulous observation. Ficino, a pioneer in 'legitimising' alchemy, clearly sets out the most prevalent conception of the relationship between art and nature during the Renaissance "For what after all is human art? It is a sort of nature handling matter from the outside. And what is nature? It is art moulding matter from within, as though the carpenter were in the wood" (253).

Ficino develops the analogy:

But if human art, though it is outside the matter, is nevertheless so well attuned and so close to making the work that it can bring definite works to completion in conformity with definite ideas, how much more then will the art of nature be able to achieve this, the art which does not touch the outer surface of matter with hands or other external tools in the way the geometer's soul touches the dust as he traces figures on the

ground, but rather the geometer's²¹ mind fashions imaginary matter within? (253)

He concludes:

For just as the geometer's mind, when it ponders in itself the rational principles of figures, forms the phantasy from within with the figures' images, and through this phantasy forms too the phantastic spirit, and does so without toil or deliberation, so in nature's art a certain divine wisdom by way of the intellectual rational principles fills with natural seeds the life-giving and motive force linked to it; and through this force it forms with utmost ease the matter too from within (253).

The diligent alchemist strove continually to approach this 'spirit' contained within all of nature so that he, too, with ease and confidence might achieve the completion of nature through his art.

The Prolegomena to Arthur Dee's *Fasciculus Chemicus*, is addressed to 'All Ingeniously Elaborate Students in the most Divine Mysteries of Hermetick Learning'. The learned author is here likened to "a skilful *Chymist*, who by *Spagyrical* operations separates the *gross* and *earthy* from the more *fine* and *pure*, and out of a large *Mass*, extracts only the *Spirit*" (13). Just as the true alchemists were confident in their divine calling as skilful aides to nature, Jonson is self-conscious and deliberate about his stance on the relationship between art and nature. Thus, in the same way that he condemns the 'false' poet for using art to undermine nature, he satirises the false alchemist for his foolishness in divorcing art from nature instead of fruitfully integrating the two to promote a

²¹OED gives as sense 1, "One who studies, or is skilled in, geometry" .

harmonious whole. Consequently, John Gordon Sweeney compares Jonson to the sincere alchemical adept, who saw himself as “using art judiciously to reveal the beauty of nature” (138), and to promote consonance and symmetry not only within the confines of his own works, but also within and between the individual and society.

Although Jonson defends this conception of art in relation to nature, he makes a distinction between the pictorial and the verbal arts, assigning pride of place to writing:

Poetry and picture arts are of a like nature, and both are busy about imitation. It was excellently said of Plutarch, poetry was a speaking picture, and picture a mute poesy. For they both invent, feign, and devise many things, and accommodate all they invent to the use and service of nature. Yet of the two, the pen is more noble than the pencil; for that can speak to the understanding, the other, but to the senses (*Discoveries*, lines 1523-1530).

The Hieroglyph

Despite his allocation of ‘second place’ to the visual arts, it is clear from the above extract that Jonson recognised the parallelism between the two art forms. Probably the most significant overlap between the poetical and the pictorial is the centrality in both of the use of symbolism. I use ‘symbolism’ in its broadest sense to refer to that which embodies several levels of

signification.²² The word ‘hieroglyph’ may be more appropriately substituted for ‘symbol’, as it was a term commonly employed during the Renaissance and used by many alchemical writers. Allen H. Gilbert notes that Jonson himself uses the word ‘hieroglyph’ to refer to the figurative representation of both people and objects (5). Despite the admonitory tone in ‘An Expostulation with Inigo Jones’, Jonson’s use of the word in this poem conveys the sense of a symbolism that points to meaning beyond the surface of things:

... O shows, shows, mighty shows!
 The eloquence of masques! What need of prose,
 Or verse, or sense to express immortal you?
 You are the spectacle of state! ’Tis true
 Court hieroglyphics, and all the arts afford
 In the mere perspective of an inch board!
 You ask no more than certain politic eyes,
 Eyes that can pierce into the mysteries
 Of many colours, read them, and reveal
 Mythology there painted on slit deal!

(*Complete Poems*, 346).

In his study of ‘The Poem as Hieroglyph’, Joseph H. Summers sheds some light on the Renaissance notion of the hieroglyph, stating that during the seventeenth century the word ‘hieroglyph’ was the most comprehensive term used to indicate all forms of symbolic or figurative language. Thus, “The hieroglyph presented its often manifold meanings in terms of symbolic

²² In his study of *The Shakespearian Tempest*, G. Wilson Knight explains that “Any one symbol is not a symbol of any one thing in particular but holds rather a number of suggestions. It might be said to have infinite relations: it is both infinite and yet closely defined.... We cannot say about any one symbol that it means anything more or less than it must mean in its particular context” (14).

relationships rather than through realistic representation” (123). I find it useful to see the ‘hieroglyph’ as resembling the metaphor, in which the hieroglyphic symbol or object corresponds to the ‘vehicle’, while the subject or thing referred to is comparable to the ‘tenor’. Summers goes on to explain that while the hieroglyph, or ‘tenor’, does not necessarily expound a clear or obvious one-on-one correspondence to the ‘vehicle’, it is often used both “as the central image in a meditation on a personal experience” (126), and “to crystallize, explain, or resolve the central conflict in a poem [or other artistic work]” (128). As I will illustrate in my discussion of *The Alchemist*, Jonson uses the hieroglyph of alchemy to achieve both purposes.

As Summers’s study of George Herbert’s poetry makes clear, the use of the hieroglyph was so prevalent at the time that it is not presumptuous to claim that many people would have had what may be called a hieroglyphic ‘state of mind’. In other words, people were exposed to symbolism in so many different ways that they were disposed to recognizing and making sense of multiple significations. This may be illustrated by reference to Montaigne’s method of explaining the nature and ‘substance’ of things metaphysical. MacFarlane and Maclean point out that:

The knowledge of the soul that Montaigne displays in the *Essais* comes, like his knowledge of death or pleasure, from experience.... But ... he has to find a way of talking about the soul that is neither pedantic nor over-coloured by moral preconceptions. What he hits on is a language based very largely on metaphor, and on metaphors drawn from the functions of the body, not as we see them in other people’s bodies but as

we feel them in our own ... [with the result that] his psychological language is poised oddly ... between science and poetry (74).

This 'poetic' or metaphoric paradigm is not unlike that which informs Paracelsus's signature theory.²³ As discussed earlier, this is a prime example of a willingness to read spiritual, or at least metaphysical, significance into the external world, whether the expression of that world were textual, dramatic, verbal, or material. Keeping in mind the blurred and often overlapping distinctions in the meta-language of figurative representation, Edward Partridge's explanation of the metaphor is pertinent at this point. It clarifies and develops the hieroglyphic rationale posited by Summers and enhances our appreciation of Jonson's use of 'figured language'. In a methodical analysis of the various functions of the metaphor, Partridge asserts that "The centrifugal impulse at the heart of images directs the mind outward beyond the confines of the thought at hand and brings the contradictory, the apparently irrelevant, and even the inexplicable within the aesthetic" (48).

The 'centrifugal' characteristic is recognised by Morris Benson. He applies it directly to Jonson's work while at the same time making the connection between Jonson's art and that of the alchemists. Benson explains that "The true genius of Ben Jonson reaches out to the wider, universal significance, [and] subtly transmutes the topical and the temporal into what is abidingly true of human nature" (68). While Benson's praise may come across as somewhat extravagant, it does serve to emphasise Jonson's skilful manipulation of multi-

²³ Making direct reference to alchemy, Paracelsus defends his reasons for writing "a unique book of alchemy", which, he claims, is "founded not by men, but upon Nature itself [and] upon those virtues and powers which God, with his own finger, has impressed upon metals" (*Archidoxes*, 1).

layered symbolism, which often operates by directing the attention from the particular to the universal, or vice versa.

This, then, was an age in which the use of symbolism was prevalent in both the secular and religious domains: in the rise of emblematic art, the subtle and not-so-subtle iconography of the monarchy, the success of the masque form, the rich heritage of the medieval mystery plays, and the widespread use of allegory. Ralph explains that

Renaissance art, like that of the Middle Ages, is weighted with symbolism. Painters and sculptors drew freely upon both Christian and pagan sources; they did not hesitate to combine elements from these divergent traditions because they regarded them not as antithetical but complementary aspects of truth (168).

In his study of *Renaissance Archetypes*, Benson explores the prevalence of archetypal images and patterns during this era. He explains that these symbolic representations are “a metaphoric way of expressing the determinate stages of human existence, and thereby working out a parallelism between the rhythmic pattern of man’s life and that of the universe, between the microcosm and the macrocosm” (xx). Symbolic practice was systematically used in the attempt to make sense of the human condition.

Alchemy as Symbolic Practice

One of the richest sources of imagery at this time was alchemy. As has been shown, alchemical texts were pregnant with arcane symbolism. The reason for

this lay in the anxieties of the alchemical authors concerning the transmission and circulation of material which could, in the wrong hands, lead to the inadvertent empowerment of the mean-spirited and ignorant. To preclude this, “alchemical works employ devices of concealment and disguise: cryptic imagery and symbol, fanciful simile and metaphor, pervasive allegory, arcane renderings of classical myth, biblical stories and fable and ... a persistently analogical habit of mind” (Linden, 32). In *His Discovery of the Miracles of Art, Nature, and Magick* (1599), Roger Bacon explains that:

The Reason then, why wise men have obscured their Mysteries from the multitude, was, because of their deriding and slighting wise mens Secrets of wisdom, being also ignorant to make a right use of such excellent matters. For if an accident help them to the knowledge of a worthy Mystery, they wrest and abuse it to the manifold inconvenience of persons and communities. Hee’s then not discreet who writes any Secret, unlesse he conceal it from the vulgar, and make the more intelligent pay some labour and sweat before they understand it (37).

He makes more or less the same point in his *Mirror of Alchemy* (1593), although with a stronger admonitory note:

Now the cause of this concealment among all wise men, is, the contempt and neglect of the secretes of wisdom by the vulgar sort, that knoweth not how to use those things which are most excellent. And if they doe conceive any worthy thing, it is altogether by chance and fortune, & they do exceedingly abuse that their knowledge, to the great damage and hurt of many men, yea, even of whole societies: so that he is worse then mad

that publisheth any secret, unlesse he conceale it from the multitude, and in such wise deliver it, that even the studious and learned shall hardly understand it (75-76).

Paracelsus expresses a similar distrust in the nature of the unlearned and vicious masses. In the conclusion to the third treatise of *The Archidoxes of Magic*, he warns potential initiates that “This [alchemical] secret was kept by the most ancient Fathers amongst their most occult and hidden secrets; who kept the same, lest it should come to the hands of wicked men, who might thereby be enabled the better, and more fully to accomplish their wickedness and evil ends” (30).

Given this context, and despite the high esteem in which he held the ameliorative potential of poesy, Jonson shares the alchemists’ pessimism about the responsiveness of either nature or humanity to the artist’s influence. He can therefore be quite dismissive of the ability of the majority to be reformed, or even to recognise the vital significance of genuine poetry. He complains that, “these things are no more written to a dull disposition, than rules of husbandry to a barren soil. No precepts will profit a fool, no more than beauty will the blind, or music the deaf” (*Discoveries*, lines 1786-1789).

Jonson’s ‘Figured Language’

As I have tried to establish, Jonson was very much a product of his age and society, as much in his appreciation of symbolism as in anything else. Those in his audience who were not of a ‘dull disposition’ would, in their turn, have been finely attuned to the layers of meaning embedded in the words and actions of

his plays. Jonson was painstakingly deliberate in his utilization of symbolism, or ‘figured language’, which, according to the following passage from the *Discoveries*, was broad and flexible enough to incorporate a range of representational devices:

Quintilian warns us that in no kind of translation, or metaphor, or allegory, we make a turn from what we began; as if we fetch the original of our metaphor from sea and billows, we end not in flames and ashes: it is a most foul in consequence. Neither must we draw out our allegory too long, lest either we make ourselves obscure, or fall into affectation, which is childish (lines 2033-2039).

But then, he asks, “Why do men depart at all from the right and natural ways of speaking?” and offers a range of possible reasons:

Sometimes for necessity, when we are driven, or think it fitter, to speak that in obscure words or by circumstance which uttered plainly would offend the hearers; or to avoid obscenity, or sometimes for pleasure and variety: as travellers turn out of the highway, drawn either by the commodity of a footpath, or the delicacy or freshness of the fields. And all this is called ... figured language (lines 2041-2048).

We can therefore be certain that Jonson’s choice of alchemy as the regulating and operative conceit of his play was carefully made, particularly in light of his admonitions against superfluous and inappropriate symbolism:

Metaphors²⁴ far-fet hinder to be understood; and affected, lose their grace. Or when the person fetcheth his translations from a wrong place: as if a privy councillor should at the table take his metaphor from a dicing house ... or a justice of peace draw his similitudes from the mathematics; or a divine from a bawdy-house.... Metaphors are thus many times deformed (lines 1923-1934).

Being then aware of the pitfalls inherent in the use of figurative language, Jonson's treatment of the 'figure' or symbolism of alchemy can be seen to conform to his own strict rhetorical and didactic standards. Although hardly a moralist, it is clear from the *Discoveries*, many of his poems and masques, and the prologues to his dramas, that one of Jonson's fundamental impulses was towards 'corrective' art that would lead to social transformation. This transformative ideal cannot be understood in narrow or parochial terms. Helena Watts Baum points out that, "Jonson's didactic theory is more philosophical than moral, more literary than monitory" (22). Like many other 'educators', Jonson's preferred 'teaching aids' were visual and verbal. As a philosophical and literary artist, his visual and verbal representations were most often imbued with many levels of symbolic significance. The preceptive basis of symbolic or figurative language is recognised by Edward Partridge, who holds that "The allusions made and the metaphors chosen may refer to the standards implicit in the culture for which the play was written or they may suggest another order of values – a past but still powerful order or an ideal and eternal order" (47). As I will argue, Jonson uses a sustained alchemical motif to

²⁴ Abrams's definition of the metaphor seems to me to provide a clearer understanding of Jonson's inclusive use of the term in the *Discoveries*, and of his practical application of symbolism in *The Alchemist*. Thus, "In a metaphor, a word or expression that in literal usage denotes one kind of thing is applied to a distinctly different kind of thing, without asserting a comparison" (97).

proffer an *alternative* set of values to that prescribed by the dominant Christian humanist teachings of the day.

In a climate in which theories of ‘teaching’ and learning were rife,²⁵ Jonson’s reformatory intentions are not to be seen as overly ambitious. Rather, it would be more accurate to place him among those “Renaissance intellectuals”, who

aimed at a total understanding of man, as a physical, psychological, and moral being, and also of the cosmos insofar as it relates to man. Moreover, they sought this knowledge not merely for intellectual satisfaction but as a means of enabling humanity to rise to its full stature (Ralph, 235).

Jonson therefore often asserts that the poet-philosopher has an unavoidable, if difficult, duty as ‘teacher’ to contribute to the betterment of society. Thus he explains the purpose and benefits of ‘poesy’ to humanity:

The study of it (if we will trust Aristotle) offers to mankind a certain rule and pattern of living well and happily, disposing us to all civil offices of society. If we will believe Tully, it nourisheth and instructeth our youth, delights our age, adorns our prosperity, comforts our adversity, entertains us at home, keeps us company abroad, travels with us, watches, divides the times of our earnest and sports, shares in our country recesses and recreations, insomuch as the wisest and best

²⁵ According to Ralph “A transformation in the character of education paralleled the rise of Renaissance scholarship and literature. The number of schools increased, the curriculum was broadened, and the techniques and objectives of education came under scrutiny” (139).

learned have thought her the absolute mistress of manners and nearest of kin to virtue (*Discoveries*, lines 2408-2419).

Jonson and Machiavelli

Because Machiavelli's political treatise, *The Prince*, had such a compelling if infamous impact on European debates about government affairs and statesmanship, much of his other work has been disregarded, and the fact that he was a skilled and respected playwright in his own lifetime is very often overlooked. There is convincing evidence that Jonson was intimately acquainted with Machiavelli's work – both dramatic and political²⁶ - and spent much of his own professional career exploring the limits of comedy. Boughner points out that Machiavelli produced a collection of comedies, which includes a romantic comedy, *Clizia*, adapted from the farcical *Casina* written by Plautus. Machiavelli's own masterpiece, *La Mandragola*, is significantly influenced by Plautus's work (15). Like Machiavelli, Jonson firmly believed in the corrective potential of comedy, when it is framed as a mirror to reflect the follies, weaknesses, and absurdities of human existence and interaction. The concurrence between Jonson and Machiavelli is further established by Boughner, who enumerates the theoretical and practical criteria shared by both. Machiavelli and Jonson adhere to the comedic principle of focusing on the lives of the common people,²⁷ in contrast to the tragic focal point of the rich and powerful aristocracy. Although their characters are brought to life through the

²⁶ See Daniel C. Boughner, *The Devil's Disciple: Jonson's Debt to Machiavelli*.

²⁷ According to Bouwsma, the Renaissance compulsion to accumulate and synthesise knowledge meant that avenues other than the traditional were being explored. Thus there was "a growing interest in ordinary experience, ordinary people, and the details of daily life, which was facilitated by the fact that such matters could now be expressed in ordinary language. This interest too had large implications for what it meant to know" (49).

use of colloquial speech, their words must be aesthetically appropriate and trenchant. Finally, both emphasise the importance of plot structure, which must be characterised by the seamless combination of suspense and resolution in the unravelling of knotty complications (17).

In his discussion of *The Alchemist*, Boughner makes clear Jonson's debt to Machiavelli:

The Prologue [to *The Alchemist*] ... is Machiavellian in its discussion of comic principles. The performance of the play, for example, requires two hours; the setting is London since the author has found that 'No countries mirth is better than our owne', a discovery noted by the Florentine. [Jonson's] *dramatis personae* of 'Bawd, squire, imposter, many persons more' is an extension of the cast recommended by the Italian; and the two writers share a belief in the general sameness of men and morals (161).

These principles are readily recognised in Jonson's other dramas, as well as in his pronouncements upon the subject in his non-dramatic writings. More significant than the purely artistic correlations between the two, however, is the overlap of the views of Jonson and Machiavelli concerning the nature of personal, societal, and universal order and relationship – or disorder and breakdown. Although Haydn does not include Jonson in his gallery of Renaissance 'movers and shakers', I want to suggest that Jonson belongs amongst "such superficially disparate figures ... [who] were leaders and (however unintentionally) collaborators in the greatest intellectual revolution the Western world had ever seen. Scornful as each of them was of many of the

others, they were all attacking ... the great central orthodox fortress of Christian humanism, which had stood, only occasionally challenged, since the twelfth century” (14).

The Alchemist as Machiavellian Exemplar

In the following chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate this concurrence in a close reading of *The Alchemist*. I will argue that although superficially it may seem that Jonson dismisses Machiavelli’s tenets, there are telling instances of agreement which only become evident if one takes into consideration Jonson’s knowledge and grasp of the Italian’s writing. This presupposes a conscious and meticulous ordering of action, characterization, and plot structure. It precludes a complacent interpretation, which dismisses as mere coincidence what is more likely to be knowledgeable artistic dexterity. I will also discuss how the Machiavellian and alchemical knowledge systems converge to give us a more subtle understanding of Jonson’s worldview and his attitudes towards the nature and trajectory of human existence.

When one reads *The Alchemist* and *The Prince* one after the other, the correlations between the two texts are interestingly highlighted. My intention here is not to propose a forced marriage between the two, but rather to raise some questions and to suggest possible answers about the apparent ambiguities and lacunae in Jonson’s own overtly expressed opinions, and in some of the interpretations of the play, which either discount or minimize the relation of Jonson’s work to issues treated by Machiavelli.

George Parfitt asserts that Jonson “continues throughout his career to labour to present an alternative to the world of *The Prince*” (144). As I will attempt to demonstrate, this deduction seems somewhat simplistic and is premised upon a misconception of Jonson’s relationship and response to Machiavelli as inferred from the former’s *Discoveries*. While Jonson certainly offers an overt critical judgement of some of the Italian’s maxims, there are intimations of a more covert concurrence with Machiavelli’s general epistemological theories and his ideas on the individual’s place and role within society. This is hardly a far-fetched overlap, as both men were intellectually vigorous and participatory in a milieu within which “the perennial subject of discussion and inquiry was nothing less than the nature of man and his place in the universe” (Ralph, 200).

Both Machiavelli and Jonson were products of societies that were becoming increasingly self-conscious and introspective with regards to their own conventions, institutions, ideologies, and convictions.²⁸ While Machiavelli was attempting to analyse the lessons of history and the practice of contemporary politics in a more scientific manner, Sir Francis Bacon and others were advocating what was then a revolutionary empirical approach to natural philosophy, including, as it did, alchemical and metaphysical phenomena. Bouwsma explains that “the humanist slogan *ad fontes* (to the sources)” informed and stimulated the penchant for empiricism during the Renaissance (189). In keeping with this empiricist approach, Jonson, too, attempted to make sense of the human condition. So, just as many of his contemporaries were exploring the frontiers of self and society, Jonson was utilizing his particular skill and art to traverse the epistemological expanses in and through his creative corpus and his non-dramatic texts.

²⁸ See Greenblatt’s argument in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*.

Jonson's exploratory engagement with the world around him, which includes the republic of letters, is all of a piece with the general philosophy of reading that he spells out in various passages in the *Discoveries*. He develops this from Seneca, who stressed the importance of personal investigation and discovery:

However, the truth will never be discovered if we rest contented with discoveries already made. Besides, he who follows another not only discovers nothing, but is not even investigating. What then? Shall I not follow in the footsteps of my predecessors? I shall indeed use the old road, but if I find one that makes a shorter cut and is smoother to travel, I shall open the new road. Men who have made these discoveries before us are not our masters, but our guides. Truth lies open for all; it has not yet been monopolized. And there is plenty left even for posterity to discover (*Oxford Authors*, 735-36).

Jonson's foregrounding of this methodology indicates that his reading was approached in a state of openness and expectation, and followed a process of interrogation rather than easy concurrence with or rejection of the many authors and views he encountered. In this, Jonson was typical of an era characterised by "questing and experimenting, an age of adventure in the world of ideas" (Ralph, 202). Given the uncertain frontiers of this new world, Ralph points out that it is hardly surprising that "Most of the contributors to Renaissance thought were eclectics rather than fanatical devotees of a single creed, and some were hopeful of achieving a reconciliation or synthesis of the various schools [of thought]" (202). Jonson and Machiavelli were both significant 'contributors' in this epistemological evolution.

In the *Discoveries*, Jonson engages directly with Machiavelli only once, where he states that:

A prince should exercise his cruelty not by himself, but by his ministers; so he may save himself and his dignity with his people by sacrificing those when he list, saith the great doctor of state, Machiavel. But I say he puts off man and goes into a beast, that is cruel. No virtue is a prince's own, or becomes him more, than his clemency; and no glory is greater than to be able to save with his power.... It is then most gracious in a prince to pardon when many about him would make him cruel; to think then how much he can save when others tell him how much he can destroy; not to consider what the impotence of others have demolished, but what his own greatness can sustain. These are a prince's virtues; and they that give him other counsels are but the hangman's factors (lines 1171-1190).

This blatant refutation of Machiavelli may at first glance seem to corroborate Parfitt's reading. Yet when we examine what else Jonson says in the *Discoveries*, it becomes clear that his engagement with Machiavelli is not as clear-cut as Parfitt would have us believe. Thus Jonson's seemingly unequivocal dismissal of Machiavelli is qualified by his candid and pragmatic appraisal of human existence. This cardinal trait is shared by the utilitarian and unsentimental Italian statesman, who pronounces that "it appears to me more appropriate to follow up the real truth of the matter than the imagination of it ... because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live, that he who neglects

what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation” (83).²⁹

While Machiavelli conceded that the optimal way to self-knowledge and truth lay in the pursuit and practice of Christian virtues, he was adamant that this was an impractical ideal in light of the everyday social and political realities. He averred that success in this secular world demanded that people suspend their traditional values, and instead base their ethics and actions on the contingent circumstances in which they find themselves. Machiavelli had no illusions: from his perspective, the *potential* for good in man and nature was irrelevant. He warns that, “doing some things that seem virtuous may result in one’s ruin, whereas doing other things that seem vicious may strengthen one’s position and cause one to flourish” (55). What matters, then, is not the abstract potential for good, but the *actuality* of a materialistic and egocentric world. Within this context, persisting in the pursuit of virtue in a world of vice is not only imprudent but also self-defeating.

Although this may be seen as a pessimistic and cynical attitude, Rolf Soellner explains that:

Machiavelli thought of life as a warfare, a fundamentally different one [from the Christian humanists]. For the Christian humanist, man had to fight his baser instincts, his vices and passions; for Machiavelli, he had to fight against other men, body against body, mind against mind ... individual success depended on the conquest of other, antagonistic

²⁹ This is in keeping with the tradition followed by “writers on social, political, ethical, and historical matters [who] adopt the pragmatic consideration of ‘things as they are’, whether in dealing with men or events” (Haydn, 85).

selves rather than on the control of one's own self. Rules could be stretched or broken in emergency (32-33).

This confrontational approach to life might, on the surface, seem not to dovetail with Jonson's averred aesthetic and philosophical principles. But in both his relationships with others and in his theatrical presentations it is precisely these Machiavellian attitudes and strategies that are foregrounded and validated. In a close reading of *The Alchemist*, I will demonstrate that while Jonson, especially in the *Discoveries*, may assert a classical and Christian humanist ideal of harmony and concord, the medium of drama runs him up against the brute reality of life as it is truly experienced.³⁰ Given his basic commitment to honesty, Jonson cannot deny his accountability as writer and artist to invite his audiences to an encounter with this truth, in the hope that they can then recognise and address the folly and vice in their own day-to-day lives.³¹ This basic Renaissance authorial tenet is built upon the classical maxim that all drama is meant to present a mirror of human life. But more than just representing life, theatre was believed to have a substantial effect on both the mind and the behaviour of audiences. Thus, "Theatre, by providing 'a shared experience, mutually understood', enables the isolated individual both to understand and, if only for a short time, to feel part of the world he or she inhabits" (Bouwsmas, 134). This was, perhaps, especially true of comedy. The

³⁰ It helps to see Jonson's views and practices within a wider context, remembering that the Renaissance was not a period of tranquility or contentment. It was an age of political conflict within and between states and of often ruthlessly competitive economic and social struggle. Not only on the physical plane but on the cultural and intellectual level also it was afflicted by crises, and it suffered from a dichotomy that pervaded the musings of scholars and philosophers. The dichotomy in Renaissance civilization – difficult to pinpoint – was essentially the gap between theory and practice, which remained wide, even though intellectuals of the period conceded in principle the necessity of bridging it (Ralph, 248).

³¹ Bouwsmas makes it clear that "In a society fragmented by social change, theatre, dealing with common experiences and perceptions, also united people ... This was especially valuable for the urban societies of the Renaissance, populated by alienated, disoriented, and anxious individuals" (133).

theory was that because comedy normally dealt with the events and affairs of ordinary folk, the didactic force would be felt across a wider spectrum of society and would thus lead to a more effective and far-reaching reform.

The Alchemist, then, embodies contemporary and classical principles of dramaturgy in the course of a dialogue which was current among artists and audiences. It exemplifies and accentuates Jonson's own, individual, way of seeing and describing the world around him. This individualism results in a refusal to conform complacently to artificial patterns of dramatic depiction, which would fit neatly within the expectations established by the pervasive ideology of Christian humanism. As Anne Barton points out, "Although an exponent of classical harmony, balance and restraint, Jonson all his life was drawn temperamentally towards what [Gerard Manley] Hopkins called 'things counter, original, spare, strange' (7). This conflict, played out in both his personal life and his writings produced for public consumption, led, perhaps inevitably, to the inner turmoil, suggested by his persistent, yet largely unfulfilled quest for the answers to life's questions, as evidenced by his religious vacillation.³² It also resulted in a sense of obligation to represent as honestly as possible the actualities of daily existence: rough, haphazard, chaotic,

³² Jonson's religious affiliations present a clear picture of a somewhat messy quest. Brought up as a Protestant, Jonson converted to Roman Catholicism in 1598 while awaiting sentencing for killing a fellow actor. According to David Riggs, this conversion was "rash" and "hard to fathom", as Catholicism had to all intents and purposes become criminalized by this time. In 1605 Jonson asserted his loyalty to James I's Protestant government by attempting to expose a Catholic priest suspected of involvement in Guy Fawkes's Gunpowder Plot. During this mission, he expressed doubts about remaining within the Catholic Church. Although he did not, at this time, renounce his own Catholicism, there seems to have been a definite waning in his allegiance to Rome. In 1610 Jonson's decision to rejoin the Church of England was ambiguously, if not contentiously, manifested at his first communion service, where, as he reported to Drummond, "in token of true reconciliation, he drank out all the full cup of wine". (602) Although Ralph makes a general point about the religious controversies that shook the very foundations of the Renaissance world-view, his observations offer some context within which to make sense of Jonson's personal experience: "As religious conflict intensified ... it also obliterated the Renaissance vision of the whole man, replacing it with the image of fractional man ... a creature who could be redeemed from his innate worthlessness only through the intervention of supernatural agencies" (250).

and frequently bizarre. And it is in *The Alchemist* that this ‘broken compass’ element is most forcefully and eloquently set forth.