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The alchemical quest and renaissance epistemology: with a comparitive study of Ben Jonson's:The Alchemist and William Shakespeare's: The Tempest

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ABSTRACT

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. The correlations between alchemy and early modern psychologies become more apparent with each chapter. In the opening chapters, the historical and intellectual context for an hypothesis of a Renaissance psychology is set out.

Chapter Three focuses on Renaissance conceptions of self-knowledge. 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. The fifth chapter is a 'bridge' between the foregoing thesis and the expository analysis of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: it 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*.

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. 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.