

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***The Alchemist*, presented by the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, Madison,
New Jersey. August 6-31, 2014.**

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Directed by Bonnie J. Monte. Sets by Jonathan Wentz. With John Ahlin (Lovewit), Jon Barker (Face), Jeffrey M. Bender (Druggier), Bruce Cromer (Subtle), Brent Harris (Epicure Mammon), Kevin Isola (Pertinax Surly), Aedin Moloney (Dol Common), Seamus Mulcahy (Kastril), James Michael Reilly (Ananias), Jon Sprik (Dapper), Raphael Nash Thompson (Tribulation Wholesome), Kristen Kittel (Dame Pliant).

These shores haven't seen a proper production of *The Alchemist* (1610) in over a decade.¹ In fact, every recent quality production of the play has been staged in Britain. In 2006, Nicholas Hytner directed a run of the play at the Royal National Theatre.² Five years later, there was a production at the Peterborough Festival by a group called The Revellers. So it was with great interest and curiosity that I attended The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's production of Jonson's antic play. 'What would prompt a renewed interest in *The Alchemist* now?' I asked myself. And how would a Yankee production of the play compare to its well-received British counterparts?

Theatre for a New Audience and Red Bull Theater, respectively, have been staging plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries for years now. As recently as January 2014, The Red Bull Theater staged a reading of *Arden of Faversham* and, two months later, of Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*. And Theatre for a New Audience staged both parts

¹ A 2009 modernization of the play by the Washington Shakespeare Company was poorly received.

² Susannah Clapp raved at Hytner's lampooning of 'a parade of [21st century] London types' trying to make it big in the city and boldly predicted that no production of the play would better Hytner's in the next two decades; see 'London low life turned to pure gold', *The Guardian* 16 September, 2006. <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/sep/17/theatre.benjonson>> [accessed 23 December, 2014].

of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* in November-December 2014. But the plays of Shakespeare's chief rival have scarcely gotten the attention that they deserve.³

One certainly wouldn't expect to find a Jonson revival in Madison, New Jersey. The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey has, despite its name, routinely staged plays written after Shakespeare's time in an effort to appeal to a broader audience. In any given year, audiences might expect to see plays by Congreve, Moliere or Shaw, but not one from Shakespeare's contemporaries. But if this well-made *Alchemist* is any indication, that may be changing in the future.

With this production, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey may just be trying to pique interest among its more Bardophilic supporters to wonder what other plays Shakespeare's contemporaneous audiences were enjoying. If *The Alchemist* is any indication, the STNJ's approach will be to take the more challenging, yet still timely and popular plays of Shakespeare's contemporaries, and make them more accessible. Director Bonnie Monte's efforts to mine what she calls the 'old gold' of *The Alchemist*⁴ and to present it anew, as well as her intention to copyright and ultimately publish her revisions to the play, signal as much.

Monte has 'translated' (to use her own word) Jonson's play in an effort to give contemporary audiences an abridged 'guided tour' through this satirical romp.⁵ Monte's approach is 'the creation of a more up-to-date language conduit through which the play can flow and emerge with deserved brilliance for the modern ear'.⁶ So, for example, when Mammon soliloquizes that Doll shall 'feel gold, taste gold, hear gold, sleep gold; / Nay, we will *concumere* gold: I will be puissant, / And mighty in my talk to her' (4.1.29-31), Monte changes Jonson's Latin '*concumere*' into the English 'commingle'.⁷ Her alteration successfully retains the cadence and sexual connotation of Jonson's original, while saving audiences the immediate work of translation. (Brent Harris's deliciously enraptured line readings of Jonson/Monte's dialogue also helped

³ There have only been two productions of Jonson plays in the New York area in the past thirty-eight years (*Volpone* and *The Devil is an Ass*). The last staging of *The Alchemist* took place forty-eight years ago. See 'Performance Archive', *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online* <<http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/reference/k/browse/performance/>> [accessed 23 December, 2014].

⁴ Programme note for *The Alchemist*, Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, 2014.

⁵ Programme note. In its unexpurgated form, Jonson's play would have taken four-plus hours to perform. Monte trims that running time down to two-and-a-half hours, including intermission.

⁶ Programme note.

⁷ Act, scene and line references are to *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

matters considerably, as did his resplendent attire.) Elsewhere, when Face reminds Subtle of the debts that the old conjurer owes to the housekeeper ('But I shall put you in mind, sir;—at Pie-corner, / Taking your meal of steam in, from cooks' stalls, / Where, like the father of hunger, you did walk / Piteously costive' (1.1.39-42)) Monte replaces Jonson's archaic 'costive' with 'constipated'. Meaning is clarified, while the tenor of the speech is left undisturbed. Because Jonson's vast repertoire of words came from existing lexica of alchemical literature, topical parlance, and peddler's French,⁸ Monte's alterations not only make the play more immediately accessible to audiences, but also allow it to retain its frenetic pacing.

Monte's translation, like all good translations, commits to the spirit of the original in meaning, rhythm, and inventive brio. I note this despite the fact that she makes over a thousand alterations to the original play script (from minor punctuation changes to major excisions of dialogue). In some cases, she keeps dialogue changes to a minimum through judiciously juxtaposed substitutions. For example, Mammon's first use of the word 'punk' is kept in place: 'No more be at charge of keeping / The livery-punk for the young heir, that must / Seal, at all hours, in his shirt' (2.1.10-12). But later in that same dialogue, 'punk' is substituted with 'whores', so that modern audiences unfamiliar with Jonson's 1610 usage can make all subsequent mental substitutions for themselves. 'You shall start up young viceroys, / And have your ~~punks~~ whores, and punketees, my Surly', Mammon promises to the gamester (2.1.22-23).

While Monte admitted during the production's talkback session that her alterations to Jonsonian metre made the play's dialogue more iambic for her Shakespeare-trained actors, the play's actors recounted the unique challenges of performing *The Alchemist*. Jeffrey Bender (Abel Drugger) mentioned that Jonson's metre was so irregular and trochaic that it was difficult to memorize and speak, even after Monte's changes. Even off-stage, he had to listen more closely for his cues than if he had been performing in a Shakespeare play. Bruce Cromer (Subtle) found the preponderance of feminine line endings to be an ordeal to recite. As one of the actors put it, '[I] couldn't rely on riding the dialogue to the end of [my] speech [as I could when performing in a Shakespeare play.]'⁹ And some of the other actors mentioned the challenges of figuring out which gestures would be most suitable to wed to Jonson's words. Despite all of these

⁸ Unlike Shakespeare, Jonson did not usually coin new expressions when available expressions didn't fit. Of all *The Alchemist's* archaic language, obtuse references, topical jokes, and technical jargon, Jonson only coined a single new expression.

⁹ The issues of early modern kinesthesia and rhetorical delivery that this mounted Jonson production raises should be provocative not only to early modern drama scholars and enthusiasts, but theorists of contemporary experimental theatre.

challenges and perhaps because Jonson's verbal styles lend themselves to distinctive (albeit unfamiliar) forms of success, this *Alchemist* sounded accessible and felt briskly paced.

But perhaps even more importantly for its audiences, this production was a spectacle to behold. The conman, Subtle (Jon Barker), slipped in and out of a welder's goggle, a captain's belt, a religious habit, and a servant's clothes, sometimes within the same scene. The Anabaptist character, Ananias (James Michael Reilly) was fitted with an austere Amish beard and a tight-fitting skull cap, lest audiences fail to recognize Jonson's satire of Puritans. Whenever the play seemed in danger of losing its audience to Jonson's most obtuse references or archaisms, Monte drew them back in through the sheer physicality of the play's characters and the breakneck pacing of its intertwined subplots. Set designer Jonathan Wentz created an intricate, two-tiered Tudor manor with eleven different entrances and exits for the con-artists and their gulls to whisk through. In a clever use of mobile staging, and perhaps borrowing from Sam Mendes' 1993 RSC production of the play, the main door of the house was built on wheels. The door detached from the 'inside' of the house to double as the outside door for the Act 5 scenes involving Tribulation Wholesome and Lovewit.

But the success of Monte's production ultimately depended upon its ability to leverage the enduring appeal of *The Alchemist*, despite its contemporaneous topicality. So instead of including dialogue that might have necessitated a familiarity with Jacobean xenophobia or the publications of Gerald Malynes or Edward Misselden, Monte retained lines like Subtle's advice to Mammon, 'If you, my son, should now prevaricate, / And to your own particular lusts employ / So great and catholic a bliss, be sure / A curse will follow, yea, and overtake / Your subtle and most secret ways' (2.3.19-23).¹⁰ These lines reflect the play's central critique: because both people and precious commodities like metals were circulating in counterfeit forms, no 'higher ground' remained from which to restrain hypocrisy or to establish economic or social

¹⁰ Malynes, in his *Saint George for England Allegorically Described* (1601), cautioned the 'physicians' of the body politic to protect England from the infections of Spanish gold and 'Turk' usury. Just eight years earlier, during a period of mounting hostility towards London's immigrant Dutch community, a libelous poem had been affixed to one of the city's foreign Protestant churches warning 'just vengeance on you all / in counterfeiting religion for your flight / when 't is well knowne, you are loth, for to be thrall your coyne, & you as countrys cause to flight with Spanish gold, you all are infected and with ytgould our Nobles wink at feats' (quoted by Jonathan Gil Harris, *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilism, and Disease in Shakespeare's England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), p. 63). Misselden, the deputy governor of the Merchant Adventurers at Delft cautioned, in *Free Trade, Or the Meanes to Make Trade Flourish* (1622), against the devaluation of English bullion as a result of the ebb and flow of transnational commerce.

legitimacy. Therefore, understanding *how* people acted (and felt compelled to be actors) might have been the only glimmer of hope for Jacobean society, Jonson imputed. In this suggestion, Monte finds a pertinent and timely lesson.

For all of her excisions and alterations to the play's dialogue, Monte recognized what was most timeless and resonantly funny about *The Alchemist*. The scene in which Don John speaks in Spanish before Subtle and Face as the two con-men gleefully insult the count to his face was prudently retained. Besides being one of the funniest exchanges in the entire play, Surly's polyglot role-playing before Face and Subtle neatly illustrates what happens when con-men unwittingly become audience members in someone else's play. Subtle and Face let down their defences, unleashing a barrage of frank insults which bespeak their earnest abhorrence of their marks. Jonson dramatized how, because con-artists transformed their aspect and attitude to meet the expectations of their marks, they often became estranged from their own emotions. Without explicitly suggesting that con-artists, and not Puritans, might make the best social reformers of the day, Jonson nevertheless implied that some of his society's wittiest persons had to forfeit their right to public expressions of dissatisfaction because their material well-being and profit depended upon pretending to be people who they were not.¹¹ The play imagined that the collective wit of a society had to cross a certain imaginative and intellectual threshold before people could be freed (even if momentarily) to be both actor and audience member.¹²

At several instances in the play, Subtle and Face make promises which, much to the surprise of the con-men themselves, are delivered instantaneously. Monte accentuated such moments. So when Subtle promises Dapper that the Queen of Fairies is but an invocation away and Dapper repeats the con man's phrase, 'Captain, I'll see her grace,' there was an immediate knock on the door (1.2.162). Dapper was naturally pleased. But it was the reaction of Jon Barker's Subtle that transfixed the audience. Half-awed to wonder whether an actual conjuration had taken place and half-shocked to discover how kismet has magically intervened in his con, Barker perfectly captured the import of the pregnant moment in his expression.

¹¹ This is despite the fact that these con artists might have been the most well-suited to enunciate a critique of the society they lived in. As Edward Partridge noted in his interpretation of the play, 'Doll, Subtle, and Face speak as though they had set up a commonwealth, with an instrument and articles, a King and a Queen, and a whole world of subjects'; see *The Broken Compass* (New York: Columbia University, 1958), p. 115.

¹² In *The Alchemist*, this moment occurs when Surly decides to create the character of Don John in order to expose Subtle and Face.

The same type of uncanny coincidence was repeated several more times in this production. By the time Subtle/Jeremy had finished assuring Lovewit of his faithfulness and was interrupted yet again, this time by a furious pounding at the door and Mammon's accusations ('Rogues, Cozeners, impostors, bawds!') the con-man was exasperated.¹³ Barker's subsequent soliloquy beautifully registered a consideration of these concatenated moments of surprise: 'Surly come! / And Mammon made acquainted! they'll tell all. / How shall I beat them off? what shall I do? / Nothing's more wretched than a guilty conscience' (5.2.33-34).

Lovewit's ultimate acceptance of Face's proffered metals and Dame Pliant suggests that *The Alchemist* isn't so much interested in rebuking society's satirists and con-artists as it is in inviting its general audience members to consider their own 'infected wills' by accepting the 'erected wit' of its few, cleverest members.¹⁴ Jonson believed that such erected wit was neither perfect nor did it give one access to the 'perfection' about which Sir Philip Sidney so famously wrote. During the post-play talkback session, I became more convinced of this than I had ever been while reading *The Alchemist*. One audience member commented on her disappointment in seeing Surly, the only character who actually seemed (to her) invested in exposing the hypocrisy of others, ending up as yet another of Face's 'victims'. I couldn't help but think that eliciting such disappointment was one of Jonson's intentions.

To admire the ability of true wits to craftily elicit such purposeful disappointment, the play haughtily advises, is to begin to 'dis-infect' one's own will. Monte's wonderful production illuminated the depths of *The Alchemist*'s trenchant and timely satire, after a long period of theatrical darkness.

¹³ Jeremy tells Lovewit, 'On my faith to your worship, for these three weeks / And upwards the door has not been open'd' (5.3.8-10).

¹⁴ Sir Philip Sidney's observation from the *Defense of Poesy* (1595) is that 'our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it'; see *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J.A. Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 25.