



Compare the use of the unities in *The Tempest* and *The Alchemist*. What differences in function and effect are there?

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McDonald has critiqued literary criticism of Shakespeare and Jonson as drawing too heavily on their dissimilar plays: in doing so it ‘establishes a simplified construction of each dramatic style in relation to its antithesis.’¹ Both *The Tempest* and *The Alchemist* adhere to the three unities of time, place and action, as prescribed in Sidney’s *Apologie for Poesie*.² An adherence to the unities is usually viewed from a dramaturgical perspective as either promoting or limiting verisimilitude. As these two plays share a fundamental similarity in their adherence to the neoclassical unities, this essay aims to explore more than just stating them as the ‘opposite poles’ of Renaissance comedy.³ By comparing two plays which share this aspect of dramatic style, in examining the differences in function and in effect in their deployment of this adherence to the unities, it might be possible to reveal deeper thematic differences in *The Tempest* and *The Alchemist*.

The unity of action is adhered to by Shakespeare and Jonson in distinctly different ways. Jonson’s *The Alchemist* follows the rise and fall of the plot to make Subtle, Face and Doll rich. While *The Alchemist* has been famously praised for having one of ‘the most perfect plots in English Literature’⁴ throughout the play itself there is an overriding sense of improvisation which contributes greatly to comedic effect: when Face and Subtle bounce off each other to unexpected events with quick-wittedness in exchanges such as this:

Face: God’s lid, we never thought of him, until now.
 Where is he?
 Doll: Here, hard by. He’s at the door.
 Subtle: [to Face] And are you not ready now? Doll, get his suit.
 He must not be sent back.
 Face: O, by no means.
 What shall we do with this same puffin here,
 Now he’s o’ the spit:
 Subtle: Why, lay him back a while,
 With some device.⁵

Indeed despite the intricate plotting, it is only at the end that all seven plots collide to make this plottedness apparent. The action unfolds in such a way as to suggest spontaneity: the peripeteia occurs as an event finally out of control of the ‘venture tripartite’ in Lovewit’s

¹ Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare & Jonson/Jonson & Shakespeare*, (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1988), p.9.

² Philip Sidney, *A Defense of Poesie and Poems*, ed. H. Morley, (Teddington: Echo Library, 2006), p.31-6.

³ Robert Orstein, ‘Shakespearian and Jonsonian Comedy’, *SS 22* (1969), p.43.

⁴ Ian Donaldson, *Jonson’s Magic Houses: Essays in Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.89.

⁵ Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. Gordon Campbell, (Oxford: OUP, 2008), Act III, scene v, 52-8.

unexpected return.⁶ On the contrary, within the first few scenes of *The Tempest* it is apparent that Prospero ‘with the provision of [his] art’ dictates the plot, to the extent that he can even guarantee that not so much perdition as a hair’ will have suffered any characters from Act 1 Scene 1.⁷ The chaotic and incidental nature of the progress of *The Alchemist* increases the dramatic tension and realism. By contrast in *The Tempest* Prospero on several occasions has asides which address the audience – a device that positions him ‘half in and half outside the dramatic action’⁸, which he utilizes to continually remind the audience of his ‘plot’, his ‘project’. This in effect limits the dramatic tension.⁹ By channeling the control of the play’s action into one character, Shakespeare appears to be making a meta-theatrical statement; indeed it is a critical platitude to compare Prospero and Shakespeare himself.¹⁰

The adherence to time is inextricably linked to the unity of action that Jonson presents. In *The Alchemist* the notion of time as an omnipresent concern is partly due to the pace; it has been claimed to be one of the most quickly paced plays in English drama.¹¹ *The Alchemist* is a play in which, to quote Subtle, ‘the quickly doing of it is the grace.’¹² This comment could summate much of the action of the play, in which Subtle and Face are racing against the clock. Indeed, as Sanders observes, the end of the play is contained within its beginning, when Subtle remarks ‘pray God the master doesn’t trouble us this quarter’ it can be seen therefore to be necessary to have a fast pace to misdirect the audience from this fact.¹³ Therefore, the unity of time can be seen on the one hand to have a distinctly functional effect in *The Alchemist*.

In *The Alchemist* the synonymous nature of the time is highlighted from the prologue in the “two hours we wish away” yet in *The Tempest* the only explicit mention of the parallel nature of the play and audience’s time is in the final scene in Alonso’s comment that it has been ‘only three hours since’ the shipwreck that opened the play.¹⁴ The position of *The Tempest*’s only synonymous time reference is symptomatic of the play’s thematic concern with time: as Michael Neill attests it is ‘notoriously’ a play ‘most of whose action belongs to the past.’¹⁵ It is, therefore, a footnote in a play in which plots are being concluded and cannot feature in how the audience relates to the play throughout. While in *The Alchemist* the parallel nature of time is established immediately, in *The Tempest* Shakespeare deploys time more broadly. The start of the play is not the start of the action and Shakespeare begins *in media ras* with Prospero providing a lengthy description of events twelve years ago. The audience similarly does not see the genesis the venture tripartite’s scheme and indeed it opens likewise *in media ras* with an argument. Yet while Jonson’s quarrel serves to contextualize their immediate histories for the audience, Prospero’s narration constitutes in itself an entire narrative of what would be recognized as a classic Shakespearian tragedy: the usurping of his kingdom by his brother is reminiscent of tragedies such as *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*.¹⁶ In this way therefore, the play opens with what is traditionally ‘seen to be the end of the revenge tragedy’¹⁷, locating itself in a broader narrative of the lives of all characters. In stark contrast

⁶ *Ibid.*, Act I, scene. i, 135.

⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Stephen Orgel, (Oxford: OUP, 2008), Act 1, scene i, 30.

⁸ A. R. Braummuller, ‘The Arts of the Dramatist’ in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*, eds. A.R. Braunmuller and M. Haltaway, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.83.

⁹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1, scene ii, 420; Act V, scene i, 1.

¹⁰ Anne Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, (London: Penguin, 1962), p.17.

¹¹ Joyce van Dyke, ‘The Games of Wits in *The Alchemist*’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 19 (1979), p.253.

¹² Jonson, *The Alchemist*, Act IV, scene iv, 106.

¹³ Julie Sanders, *Ben Jonson’s Theatrical Republics*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1998)

¹⁴ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1, scene ii, 239-240.

¹⁵ Michael Neill, ‘Remembrance and Revenge: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*’ in *Jonson and Shakespeare* ed. Ian Donaldson, (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), p.46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.49.

to this Jonson locates *The Alchemist* not only as synonymous to the time of the audience but also as unquestionably contemporary: it is set in 1610 and topicality is further adhered to by the very premise of the plague. It is relentlessly contemporary.

Time in *The Alchemist*, is a constant concern for the dramatis personae. In *The Tempest* references to time are described in terms of opportunity throughout the play. In Act II, scene i, Antonio whilst persuading Sebastian that he should usurp Alonso, uses the imagery of taking control of time declaring that ‘what’s past is prologue, what to come / Is yours and my discharge.’¹⁸ Similarly, it is the opportunity of time that motivates Prospero to cause the tempest, it is the well-timed moment that ‘depend[s] upon / A most auspicious star, whose influence If now I court not, but omit / My fortunes will ever after droop.’¹⁹ In *The Alchemist* Mammon sees ultimate power over nature to be measured out in time: he dreams of being able to compress ‘a month’s grieffe, in a day; a yeeres, in twelve’.²⁰ Yet while in *The Tempest* the idea of taking control of time is a serious theme of the play, Mammon’s hopes to compress time are in *The Alchemist* a subject of ridicule. This can further be explored by examining Renaissance conceptions of time.

Time is and was a social construct.²¹ Moreover, it was a social construct that was in flux in Renaissance England. Shakespeare, it has been argued, saw through time a possibility of renewal: ‘durative time.’²² The inevitability of repetition and the possibility of reaching eternity are characteristic of these Renaissance ideas of time: contemporaries attempted to reconcile the mutability and insubstantial nature of individual life by forging a link between the transient and eternity. Time, and life itself, was according to a contemporary, George Hakewill:

a *Wheele*, [which] at every turne, bringeth about all his Spoakes to the same places, observing a constancy even in turning... So though there be many changes and variations in the World, yet all things come about one time or another to the same points againe. And there is nothing new under the *Sunne*.²³

In Act V when Miranda exclaims how bounteous the ‘brave new world’ is, Prospero ambiguously comments ‘tis new to thee’: even in this brief exchange the durative nature of time within the play is demonstrated.²⁴ Indeed, repetition is established through the play’s subplots; the twin attempts to usurp power from both Alonso and Prospero demonstrate that despite a large passage of time, and different characters being involved, the essential plots are the same, and that indeed there is ‘nothing new under the Sunne’.²⁵ Whilst in *The Tempest* restoration is allowed Shakespeare simultaneously suggests continuity and repetition: there is a periodic constancy obscured beneath surface unpredictability.²⁶ As such even though the time is synonymous with the audience’s watching time, Shakespeare uses this unity to draw attention to the fact that the story both begins and ends far beyond the three hours they are watching for: in a cyclical eternity. This is further solidified by Prospero’s epilogue in which he remains in character and appeals to the audience to by their indulgence ‘set [him] free’

¹⁸ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act II, scene I, 250-1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Act I, scene ii, 181-2.

²⁰ Jonson, *The Alchemist*, Act II, scene i, 66.

²¹ David Harvey, ‘Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination’, *Association of American Geographers*, 80 (1990), p.148.

²² Douglas Peterson, *Time, Tide and Tempest: A Study of Shakespeare’s Romances*, (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1973), p.17.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act V, scene i, 123-5.

²⁵ Peterson, p.17,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.50-1.

from the island.²⁷ As Kiernan corroborates ‘Shakespeare’s play it would seem will never end’.²⁸

The Alchemist, on the contrary, ‘suddenly and strangely stops.’²⁹ Taken into this context of contemporary debates about the nature of time itself, it becomes interesting to examine Jonson’s conception of time. Critics attest that the alternative concept to durative time originated in classical concepts of time as a measure of transience, divorced from ideas of God.³⁰ This alternative concept was deeply concerned with the mystery of ‘swiftgliding Time’ and its effects on human personality.³¹ Montaigne describes the essence of man as ever-changing from day to day from minute to minute.³² Humans and life itself were ‘ever gliding, alwaies [*sic*] fluent... without ever being stable or permanent.’³³ Smallwood claims that the world of *The Alchemist* is ‘static and confined, hardly subject even to change, much less amendment.’³⁴ This would appear to contradict the idea that classically influenced Renaissance ideas of time are visible in *The Alchemist*. Yet in *The Alchemist* Jonson presents a world in which identity is forever shifting; people literally change their ‘face’ in every situation. Mebane comments that the dramatis personae only go through ‘illusory transformations.’³⁵ Indeed this is the case, but the fact that every single character fails to recognize the illusory nature of these transformations and that this trait is left intact at the end of the play suggests it is a conscious decision by Jonson. Face undergoes one final yet no more substantial transformation into ‘smooth’ Jeremy, which leaves the audience with the disquieting impression that he has no fixed personality.³⁶ As Face begins the play demanding of Subtle ‘who am I you mongrel?’ the question is still unanswered by the end.³⁷ Instead the audience is left no wiser as to who the real Face is: Subtle states he was an ‘honest and plain’ man before the start of the play and that it was by his means he was ‘translated’ into a cozener.³⁸ Face outsmarts him on enough occasions in the play to make this assessment dubious by the end. The volatile sense of identity combined with the linear adherence to time suggests Renaissance concepts of time should be a key consideration when understanding the messages of Shakespeare and Jonson’s plays. In adhering to the unities of time, Shakespeare does so to demonstrate the underlying cyclical permanence of his narrative in *The Tempest*, while Jonson shows a conception of linear time that disquietingly highlights the transience and essential mutability of the present.

The difference in the imaginative leap between the locations may be more useful than just seeing *The Alchemist* and *The Tempest* as either adhering, or flouting the unity of place. Both plays were originally staged in Blackfriars indoor theatre. Shakespeare, it has been argued, was inclined to credit the audience’s imagination with a greater power than Jonson was.³⁹ The Elizabethan stage was void of any type of scenic illusion: ‘the stage-location was whatever the dramatists made his actors say it was.’⁴⁰ *The Tempest* is set on a

²⁷ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act V, scene i, 337-8.

²⁸ Pauline Kiernan, *Shakespeare’s Theory of Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.100.

²⁹ Donaldson, p.120.

³⁰ Peterson, p.22; Gary Waller, ‘Transition in Renaissance ideas of time and the place of Giordano Bruno’, *Neophilologus*, volume 55, Number 1, p.9.

³¹ Montaigne, cited by Waller, p.10.

³² *Ibid.*, p.11.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ McDonald, p.12.

³⁵ John Mebane, ‘Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: Utopianism and Religious Enthusiasm in *The Alchemist*’, *Renaissance Drama*, 10 (1979), p.128-9.

³⁶ Jonson, *The Alchemist*, Act IV, scene vii, 131.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Act 1, scene i, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Act 1, scene i, 18,

³⁹ McDonald, p.9.

⁴⁰ R. Foakes, ‘Playhouses and Players’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Drama* eds. A.R. Braunmuller and M. Haltaway, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.21.

distant and non-specific island, while *The Alchemist* is set in the very real location of Blackfriars itself. The breakdown of the boundaries of location by simultaneously declaring that the play's setting was 'here in the friars' brings about a sense of immediacy and relevance that defines how the audience will relate to the play as a whole: it serves to make the play utterly and instantaneously relevant.⁴¹ As such, when Jonson includes references to Holborn, for example, the audience would inevitably make the connection between their own knowledge of the material London area and the illusory action of the play, violating the boundaries between the fictional world of the play and the real world of the audience and the city.⁴² It is therefore perhaps better to view Jonson's realistic setting not as doubting the audience's imaginative ability, on the contrary, he utilises the audience's imagination in a specific way to blend the real and imaginary world of *The Alchemist*.

In comparison to the physical and concrete geography that Jonson locates *The Alchemist* in, Prospero's non-specific magical island seems to be wildly imaginative. Yet, even within the descriptions of the island itself the audience is not given any specific features, as Shakespeare allows for a multiplicity of imaginative possibilities. Both the possibility of the island as either barren or bounteous is present in descriptions of it, without any particular indication to suggest one is truer than the other:

Adrian: The air breathes upon us here most sweetly.

Sebastian: As if it had lungs, and rotten ones.

Antonio: Or as it if 'twere perfumed by a fen.⁴³

In setting the play within an uninhabited island Shakespeare creates a distance that opens up the collective audience's realms of possibility and their imaginative involvement from the outset. This pastoral setting meant that the audience would 'expect action to be more symbolic than real.'⁴⁴ Therefore, Shakespeare's choice in location opens up an abstract setting wherein a more philosophical message about forgiveness as opposed to vengeance is to be displayed.

The urban setting is a location which further amplifies *The Alchemist's* fixation with identity. Sennett defines the city as a place in which at most people are essentially strangers where no background histories are known, resulting in the 'immediate frame of moment' being what people must base their beliefs on.⁴⁵ Sanders elaborates further by stating identity in cities 'is dependent upon public enactment and interpretation' and that the 'temptation to falsify and conceal is omnipresent.'⁴⁶ The urban setting therefore necessitates a deleterious view of history; the moment of the present is the only thing that exists. The key difference then between the feel of *The Alchemist* and *The Tempest* is therefore in the importance or indeed presence of the past. Ironically, considering the explicit anchoring of the time and place of *The Alchemist* is the fact that no-one seems to have any sense of the past: indeed Mammon comments that he has 'one o'the treacherou'st memories of all mankind.'⁴⁷ Indeed by using the unity of time and place to relentlessly locate the action of the play in the present time and place of the audience, Jonson presents a contrast between the precise and fixed facts of the date and location and the elusive and volatile identities of the dramatis personae, who while despite being constantly being named and renamed are never really identified.

Overall, *The Tempest* and *The Alchemist* demonstrate that within an adherence to

⁴¹ Jonson, *The Alchemist*, Act 1, scene i, 17.

⁴² Robert Smallwood, 'Here in the Friars': Immediacy and Theatricality in *The Alchemist*, *Review of English Studies*, 32 (1981), p.142.

⁴³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act II, scene i, 47-9.

⁴⁴ Peterson, p.216.

⁴⁵ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.48.

⁴⁶ Sanders, p.79.

⁴⁷ Jonson, *The Alchemist*, Act II, scene iii, 276-7.

the unities there are spaces of possibilities that both further account for the message and feel of the play. The choice between urban and pastoral settings, topicality and detachment from current affairs, amongst others all constitute an important facet in determining *The Tempest's* and *The Alchemist's* meaning and message. An examination of the unities is a useful epistemological tool, revealing with some depth the ways in which Shakespeare and Jonson differ thematically in their deployment of unities and indeed helps to see the unity their plays offer on different levels. Jonson unremittingly unites time and place to create a fundamental dichotomy between the non-specificity of the *dramatis personae*, whereas Shakespeare uses time and place to create an imaginative distance which liberates his play to display a more philosophical message.

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