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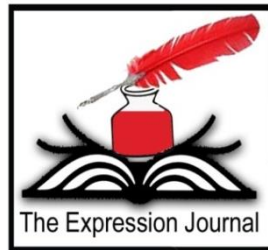
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Art of Redemption and Deception: Interplay of Illusion and Reality in *The Tempest* and *The Alchemist*

Trisha Ghosh

Master of Arts Degree in English Literature

[Renaissance and 18th Century pathway]

University of Liverpool, Liverpool

Email Id: trishaghosh020799@gmail.com

Contact No. (+44) 7747927366

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Abstract

This paper explores the how the thematic use of illusion in Willam Shakespeare *The Tempest* and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. In *The Tempest*, Prospero's magical art uses illusion as a transformative force guiding its characters to a state of moral enlightenment and to total redemption. In contrast, *The Alchemist* presents illusion as a mechanism of fraud where Subtle's alchemical art deceives its victims. Jonson's satirical treatment of illusion serves as critique of the corrupt ambitions of the contemporary society, exposing self-delusion perpetuates moral decay. While both play questions the boundaries of illusion and reality, they diverge in their conclusions – Shakespeare suggests that illusion can lead to moral clarity, whereas Ben Jonson dismantles it and exposes human flaws. This paper argues that while each playwright explores the power of illusion, their treatment reflects fundamentally different attitude towards the potential for redemption and deception in respective societies.

Keywords

Illusion, Reality, Magic, Art, Theatrical Deception, Redemption, Alchemy, Moral Redemption, Corruption.

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Introduction

The Renaissance saw a new fascination with art and its ability to present a realistic representation of the world. Having its roots in Greek philosophical traditions, the artist of the period, like Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo used their mastery with art to create life-like images and sculptures, blurring the line between what was real and what is unreal¹. These real-life depictions however, hinted at the idea that art can be illusive and makes us question the authenticity of the real. This complex interplay between reality and illusion was also true in terms of literature and theatre as well. Playwrights such a William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson used the illusive nature of art to manipulate theatrical space, language, and spectacle to engage audiences in complex reflections on perception and deception. Anthony B. Dawson states, "Shakespeare, because he is working in the drama, proceeds somewhat differently from novelist or painter, though analogously. Forhim, too, the relation between audience and stage life is crucial; for him, too, the audience's awareness of the complex fictiveness of their experience is fundamental; but he has the additional advantage of being able to enact, or have his actors enact within the play, the very processes which the play itself sets out to encourage in its audience." ² Similarly, L.A. Beaurline states, "Jonson along with more advanced writers of the seventeenth century chose to be less cosmic than his predecessors, and less quantitative, more selective and exhaustive. At least in his major

¹E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Ilusion: A Study of in The Psychology of Pictorial Representations* (Princeton University Press, 1969) p. 93-146.

Sandra Willard, 'The Ilusion of Renaissance', in *Topics in Western Civilization: Ideals of Community and the Development of Urban Life, 1250-1700*, Yale- New Haven Teacher's Institute.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1986/3/86.03.08/4> [accessed December 10, 2024]

²Antony B. Dawson, 'Introduction' in *Indirections: Shakespeare and the Art of Illusion* (University of Toronto Press, 1978) p. xii.

comedies he shows an impressive mastery of the art of limiting and the completeness within those limitations”³.

This essay explores the function of illusion in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, arguing that both plays deploy illusion as an artistic and ideological tool – Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* uses magic as a redemptive art aligning illusion with artistic transcendence and moral transformation and Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* exposes illusion as a mechanism of social and financial exploitation. In contrasting these two treatments of theatrical magic, this essay situates early modern drama within Renaissance aesthetic discourses on artifice, perception and power.

Theatrical Illusion and Prospero’s ‘Art’

Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is structured around Prospero’s command of magic; a force consistently described as his ‘art’. In Act I Sc ii, Prospero declares, “[...] I have such provision in mine art/ So safely ordered that there is no soul – /No, not so much perdition as an hair, /Betid to any creature in the vessel [...]”⁴ (1.2.27-30). Prospero’s magic operates as a theatrical device, used by Shakespeare, crafting illusions that manipulates the perceptions of the play’s character. These lines above evidently foreshadow Prospero’s first major act- the storm at sea in Act 1 Sc I, is an elaborate deception, which only terrifies Alonso and his troops without any intension of physical harm. Dawson comments in this regard that “Prospero's art of illusion, like Shakespeare's, works to create attitudes in both characters and audience which can ease the tension between the demands of personal identity and those of social solidarity.”⁵ Prospero’s use of magic as a vehicle to create illusion, therefore, becomes synonymous to Shakespeare’s use of illusion as a theatrical tool to set the stage for a dramatic experience to manipulate the perception of his audience to serve the purpose of moral and social restoration.

The concept of illusion is not just confined to Prospero conjuring up a storm. It is evenly distributed throughout the play where Prospero manipulates every aspect of the realities of the other characters. Shakespeare subtly weaves the idea of redemption by the interplay of reality and illusion – highlighting Prospero as a magician and moral arbiter. The moral and psychological sensitivity of the shipwrecked characters gets its exposure in Act II where we encounter a deeper exploration of illusion. Gonzalo’s optimistic claim that “Here is everything advantageous to life” (2.1.52) and their “garments are now as fresh as when we put them on” (2.2.70-71), suggests he views the island an Edenic space bringing in new possibilities. His speech on the idea of a utopic commonwealth is evident of him seeking refuge in illusion. Gonzalo’s illusive utopia is dismissed by Sebastian and Antonio’s mockery and their cynicism which finds its relevance when Ariel’s enchanting song lulls everyone but these two men, finally unveiling their cynical reality. Dean Ebner notes that Shakespeare always uses a Gonzalo like figure to juxtapose illusory idealism against the brutalities of the world,⁶

³L.A. Beaurline, ‘Ben Jonson and the Illusion of Completeness’, *PMLA*84(1) (1969) p. 51

⁴William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* ed. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan (London, 2014) pp. 171-202. For all quotes ref. to this edition (Arden Shakespeare). All acts, scenes and line numbers are mentioned in the main body of the passage.

⁵Anthony B. Dawson, ‘The Tempest’ in *Indirections: Shakespeare and the Art of Illusion* (University of Toronto Press, 1978) p. 156 (All references from this chapter book have been cited in the main body of the passage)

⁶Dean Ebner, *The Tempest: Rebellion and the Ideal State* (Oxford University Press) pp. 166-169

which aligns with the idea that illusion is a counterpart of reality. Antonio's verbal manipulation of Sebastian to kill Alonso, convincing him, "My strong imagination sees a crown/ Dropping upon your head." (2.1.208-9) emphasize how Antonio uses illusion as manipulative tool to corrupt Sebastian. He urges Sebastian by his rhetorical temptations:

Antonio: "What great hope have you! No hope that way is/ Another way
so high a hope that even / Ambition cannot pierce a wink beyond, / But
doubt discovery there." (2.1.240-43)

Antonio's words give Sebastian a false sense of entitlement where betrayal is a feasible option than being desirable. However, Ariel's intervention with his enchanting music waking up Gonzalo and Alonso from their sleep pushes the interplay between illusion reality to a climatic peak underscoring Dawson's statement "*The Tempest* creates illusions and invites our participation in them. It seeks to make us aware of the power of these artificial creations in the face of the resistance of nature" (Dawson, 158). It is interesting to note how the entire Act II is a careful manipulation of Prospero's magic. By putting everyone to a magical sleep except Antonio and Sebastian, Prospero deliberately expose Antonio and Sebastian's ambitions. This reflects the Renaissance belief that art has the capability to reveal deeper truths of human nature.⁷ As Prospero's crafted illusion sets the other characters' journey towards redemption in motion; it reflects Shakespeare's intension to lead to this audience into spiritual redemption through this magic of theatrical illusion.

Moving further to Act III in *The Tempest*, Prospero builds a dramatic plot surrounding Alonso, Gonzalo, Sebastian and Antonio. Shakespeare very carefully points out all the moral flaws ultimately directing its characters into a moral and spiritual enlightenment.⁸ The famous harpy scene in Act 3 Sc 2, displays a dramatic use of illusion serving its moral purpose. The strange figures bringing in the banquet with Prospero watching from a distance is symbolic of how everything presented in front of the characters is a careful manipulation of Prospero's magical art, resonating Shakespeare's use of theatrical art to lead his audience into a state of moral redemption.⁹ The disappearance of the banquet table followed by Ariel's appearance as a harpy, sets the stage for its first step towards moral redemption of its characters. The Harpy's words, "You are the three men of sin, whom Destiny [...]/ Hath caused to belch up you" (3.3. 53-56), revert back to the characters' past actions giving them the space for self-reflection. This resonates back to Dawson's statement that Shakespeare builds a regenerative plot by "presenting an illusion as if it were a reality within a larger illusion" (Dawson, 161) asking the audience to see through the illusions presented in the play by Prospero's magic and his own theatrical illusions that hinges in a moral purpose. The entire speech of the harpy is designed in such a manner that it seems that justice becomes a cosmic demand; and that the speech pulls the moral chords of the three sinners and leads them to repentance. Shakespeare's art of creating theatrical

⁷E.H. Gombrich, 'Ambiguities of the Third Dimension' in *Art and Illusion: A Study of in The Psychology of Pictorial Representations* (Princeton University Press, 1969) p. 242

⁸Parallels Anthony Dawson's remark that such acceptance and wonder is a necessary "prelude to any form of regeneration" (Indirections: Shakespeare and the Art of Illusion) p. 161

⁹Northrop Frye, 'Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbol' in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*(Princeton University Press, 2015) pp. 95-115 Northrop Frye's mythic archetypal theory aligns with Prospero as a godlike figure leading the characters to moral redemption.

illusions, therefore, becomes more dramatic in Act III where, magical art, far from being deceptive serves the purpose of confrontation and reconciliation. This is marked by the responses of the characters which in Dawson's terms "melts quickly into belief and acceptance" (Dawson, 160):

Alonso: "O, it is monstrous, monstrous! / Methought the billows spoke
and told me of it [...] I'll seek him deeper than e'er plummet sounded, /
And with him their lie mudded."(3.3. 95-101).

Interestingly, Prospero's relationship with Ariel and Caliban further elucidates Shakespeare's engagement with Renaissance debates on illusion on reality. Ariel, the spirit of the air embodies the ephemeral and transformative nature of Prospero's art, seamlessly shifting between roles to execute his master's will. James E. Robinson comments, "If, indeed, Prospero is suggestive of the dramatic artist effecting his truth in the time of the dramatic illusion, Ariel becomes not only an expression of Prospero's dramatic power but a symbol of the union of art and nature."¹⁰ Caliban, contrastingly, resists the power of illusion. His lament, "You taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is, I know how to curse"- suggests that for all of Prospero's civilizing illusion, some aspects of nature remains resistant to transformation. The dichotomy reflects anxieties about the limits of artifice: while illusion can momentarily reshape perception, it cannot fundamentally alter the nature of reality.¹¹

Illusion as an Instrument of Fraud in *The Alchemist*

If *The Tempest* employs illusion as a means of ethical transformation, Jonson's *The Alchemist* presents it as an instrument of fraud. Set in contemporary London, the play dramatizes the schemes of Face, Subtle and Dol Common, who use theatrical deception to swindle several gullible customers. Richard Allen Cave in his work on Ben Jonson points out that Jonson created "a series of farcical characters each intent on realising a *better* self, come in the clutches of a trio, consummate actors all, who in a mercantile age are choosing to sell illusion as a commodity"¹². Unlike Prospero's magic Subtle's 'alchemy is overly deceptive, promising change that never comes to pass. The Renaissance fascination with transmutation whether in alchemy¹³ or in art is parodied here by Jonson, a renowned critic of theatrical excess who highlights how people fall easily for illusion when it fits their needs.

Through the very first act Jonson successfully establishes the boundaries between the illusion and the reality of the contemporary world. Gail Kern Paster notes, "The pressure of actuality is intensified in the first scene by the trio's fear of being overheard, which runs like a leitmotif through the scene and suggests the silent, invisible presence of observant neighbours just beyond Lovewit's house. The audience, now both imaginary Blackfriars neighbors as well as actual Blackfriars theatre goers, thus become the boundary of the play's physical world, the embodiment of actuality

¹⁰James E. Robinson, 'Time and "The Tempest"', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 63(2) (1964) p. 266

¹¹On this theme, ref to Roger Egan, 'This Rough Magic: Perspectives of Art and Morality in The Tempest', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 23(2) (1972) p. 171-182

¹²Richard Allen Cave, "The Alchemist", in Ben Jonson (Macmillan, 1991)p. 77-78. All references from this book are cited in the body of the text.

¹³Ref to Joseph Horner Coates, 'The Renaissance of the Alchemist', *The North American Review* 185(596) (1906) p.82-97 for this theme.

pressing on illusion, and of illusion confronting actuality.”¹⁴ Therefore, Subtle saying, “made thee a second, in mine own great art”(1.1.77)with Dol’s words “Have you together cozened all this while, /And all the world [...]” (1.1.122-23) establishes the fact that the trio’s elaborate performance, akin to stagecraft, thrives on their victim’s willingness to believe in transformation. At the end of this scene, we see Subtle changing into his robes to welcome Dapper, Jonson pushes his audience to look beyond what they see and question its authenticity. The manipulative tactics displayed by the trio becomes a direct reference of what Jonson warns his audience – “beware of what hands thou receivestthy commodities”¹⁵. They transform a mundane fancy into an extravagant performance suggesting Cave’s observation that the trio are “consummate actors selling illusion as a commodity” mirroring the “mercantile” anxieties of Jacobean England. Jonson’s satire thus critiques human inclination to be duped and the commodification of illusion in an increasingly mercantile society, where illusion becomes dangerously intertwined by reality.

The concept of illusion and reality finds a very intense depiction in Act II with the introduction of Sir Epicure Mammon and Surly. Jonson’s tricksters use alchemical art as the tool for false transformation. Although their trickery mirrors Antonio’s rhetorical deception in *The Tempest*, their illusion does serve any moral purpose, it is more exploitative in nature. Sir Epicure Mammon’s imaginations that the Philosopher’s stone can change his fortune, bringing him limitless wealth and power, is validated by Subtle, Face and Dol who successfully convinces him of the alchemical transformation. The trio’s shifts in roles marks the rhetoric of performance implemented by Jonson to showcase the moral corruption of his age¹⁶. Singling out Sir Mammon from the tricksters, Jonson’s portrayal of him is significant. His words, “This is the day where in to all my friend, / I will pronounce the happy word, “Be rich”;/ This day you shall be *spectatissimi*.” (2.1.6-8), echoes his gullibility. Again, Gail Kern Paster points out that, “The conjunction in three of four of Jonson’s great comedies of single and local settings is part of a larger effort on his part sharply to reduce the possible sphere of action in his plays in order to embody an underlying truth about the comic discrepancy between illusion and actuality”¹⁷. Thus, Mammon’s delusions epitomize the fact the victim’s self-deception is as absurd as the tricks played on them.

However, it is interesting to note, how Ben Jonson places the character of Surly as a counterpart to Mammon’s delusional self. Surly’s scepticism and doubt about Face and Subtle’s work provides another angle in understanding Jonson’s exploration of illusion and reality. Jonson uses Surly as his mouthpiece to makes the audience look beyond what they see and place reason in world permeated by illusion. When Mammon is consumed by his own fancies and a blind faith in the promises of alchemical transformation, Surly intervenes with sarcastic comments. His words, “Faith Sir, I have humour. / I would not willingly be guiled. Your stone/ Cannot transmute me.” (2.1. 77-80), mocks the entire business of alchemy highlighting its deception. Surly’s scepticism is not only personal as a character, but also symbolic as it reflects Jonson’s own mind–

¹⁴Gail Kern Paster, ‘Ben Jonson’s Comedy of Limitation’, *Studies in Philology* 72(1) (1975) p.58

¹⁵Ben Jonson, ‘To the Reader’ in *The Alchemist* ed. Douglas Brown (London & New York, 1966) p. 4

¹⁶ Michael Flachmann, ‘Ben Jonson and The Alchemy of Satire’, *Studies in Literature 1500-1900*, 17(2)(1977) pp. 259-280

¹⁷Gail Kern Paster, ‘Ben Jonson’s Comedy of Limitation’, *Studies in Philology* 72(1) (1975) p.54

his concern for the society where the newly developed pseudo-sciences preyed on the gullible¹⁸. Although, surely serves as the audiences' proxy to differentiate between reality and illusion which becomes a biting contrast to Mammon's gullibility, Jonson inverts the Surly character when he lets him get duped by Face and Subtle. This moment in the play is a poignant portrayal of how Jonson satirizes the frailty of human minds. To David Finnigan, "Although he [Surly] is a confidence man, he finally ends up as big a fool as the others – perhaps a bigger one – for he alone has been able to see the truth, and yet has deceived himself by playing false"¹⁹; but Surly's portrayal is in fact Jonson's attempt to mask off the blurred line between illusion and reality. Surly being a rouge and ultimately being duped at the hands of Subtle and Face immediately coincides with Jonson's attempt to depict the limits of illusion that compromises the reality.

Ben Jonson's satirical use of illusion and deception intensifies as it takes a religious turn. The appearance of Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome the Puritan hypocrites are significant. Ananias declares, "In pure zeal, / I do not like the man, he is a heathen [...]" (3.1. 4-5) and Tribulation declares Subtle as "profane person indeed" (3.1. 6) yet, they arrive at Subtle's doorstep with the belief that the philosopher's stone which has the elixir of life, will bring prosperity to their religious community. As Cave points out "At the root of all their dreams lies a longing for esteem, position, conspicuous social success" (Cave, 80). Their credulity exposes not only their greed but also the way illusion, when framed within the rhetoric of transformation can even manipulate the supposedly pious. This, however, becomes advantageous for the trio to meet their materialistic gains as deception becomes easier when is consumed by their self-delusion. Subtle does not possess the philosopher's stone but he creates an illusion of it by his alchemical language which serves as a powerful tool in duping the victims who are too consumed by greed and ambition Gabriele B. Jackson notes, that the "philosophers stone is merely a touchstone", that does not change anything.²⁰

However, the final acts of both plays ultimately resolve the tension between illusion and reality, through in markedly different ways. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's use of illusion as a transformative force reaches its culmination when Prospero's magic facilitates moral enlightenment and reconciliation. Alonso's repentance, his reunion with his son Ferdinand, the extension of forgiveness to the treacherous Antonio and Sebastian demonstrates that illusion, even if it has the capacity to distort the reality, leads to self – awareness and redemption. Prospero's final renunciation of magic in the

¹⁸Ref. to footnote 16. Flachmann talks about Jonson's use of pseudo-scientific puns to delight his audience. Also, Ref. to G.C. Heseltine, 'Science and Pseudo-Science', *The Irish Monthly*, 60(174) (1932) p.756-766 for the development of pseudo-science during the early modern period.

¹⁹David F. Finnigan (1980) 'The Role of Surly in "The Alchemist"', *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol 16 (1) p.104

²⁰Gabriele Bernhard Jackson, 'First Appearances' in *Vision and Judgment in Ben Jonson's Drama* (Yale University Press, 1968) p. 89-90 Jackson mentions how Subtle misuses his knowledge of alchemy. He states how "Subtle uses this "art" to pervert that Nature does not strive towards perfection, distorting the reality with a false sense of it.

epilogue – “Now my charms are all o’erthrown,/ And what strength I have’s mine own, [...]” (Epilogue, 1-2) – is significant as it highlights his final recognition that true authority lies in human agency and not illusion. Shakespeare allows his audience to contemplate on the purpose of theatrical illusion, which, rather than deceiving, serves as a channel for moral and philosophical insight.

In contrast, *The Alchemist*, dismantles illusion to expose the corruption and folly of Jonson’s contemporary society. Lovewit’s return dispels the elaborate deceptions woven by Subtle, Face and Dol Common, yet the resolution is far from redemptive. While the tricksters largely escape retribution, the victims – Dapper, Mammon and the Puritans Ananias and Tribulations are left as embodiments of greed, unchecked ambition and self-delusion. Jonson’s critique is rather harsh than that of Shakespeare who shows a possibility of renewal. *The Alchemist* shows a world where illusion sustains rather than reforming human folly. Richard Allen Cave rightly points out that Jonson successfully creates “an alternative imaginative self out of a perverted idea of the privilege enjoyed by aristocratic society” (Cave, 81). Jonson’s satire does not simply ridicule theatrical deception but exposes the deeper social and moral blindness that allows such illusions to flourish.

Conclusion

Ultimately, both plays use the power of illusion, but they diverge from each other in their conclusion. Shakespeare’s use of illusion becomes a guiding force for his characters towards self-discovery, moral enlightenment and redemption, offering optimistic resolution, Jonson’s *The Alchemist* destabilizes this to reveal the enduring corruption of society – pointing out that illusion often reinforces the very flaws which it pretends to remedy.

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