

**Two Tales of a City:  
London in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and Samuel Johnson's *London***

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Article Info.		
Received: 7 March 2018	Reviewed: 11 April 2018	Accepted: 22 May 2018

**Suggested Citation;** Boobani, Farzad. "Two Tales of a City: London in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and Samuel Johnson's *London*." *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Winter and Spring 2018, pp. 5-18.

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**Abstract**

Adopting a descriptive-analytical method, this article aims to closely examine the representations of London in Ben Jonson's early seventeenth-century play *The Alchemist* and Samuel Johnson's mid-eighteenth-century poem *London*. These two great examples of literary texts provide the reader with two highly distinguishable treatment of the subject, that is to say London. Jonson's drama depicts life in his native London mainly to satirize it. Likewise, Samuel Johnson's poem denounces London life for what he thinks to be its immorality, anarchy and corruption. However, both authors seem to have been fascinated with London at the same time: while Jonson's interest is evident from his detailed cataloguing of city sites, Samuel Johnson gradually reconciles himself to London to finally declare it to be the city that houses "all that life can afford".

**Keywords:** London, Urban Space, Satire, Moral Space, B. Jonson, S. Johnson.

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## 1. Introduction

Embittered with London life and society as he found it in the 1730s, Samuel Johnson (1709-84) denounced the city in his poem, *London* (1738), as “the needy villain’s gen’ral home” (l. 93)<sup>1</sup>. Interestingly, this image of London reverberates with how Johnson’s literary forebear, Ben Jonson (1572-1637) represented London in the 1600s: a city dominated by corruption, hypocrisy, avarice and anarchy. Both authors are, thus, thematically connected in depicting and criticizing London life. However, each of them has a specific medium at his disposal (drama in the case of Ben Jonson and poetry in that of Samuel Johnson) to give voice to his criticism of the faults he finds with the city’s state of affairs.

Jonson’s dramatic response to London life in his play *The Alchemist* (1610) is invigorated by a variety of city sites, characters and dialogues. Samuel Johnson, in contrast, opts for a lengthy monologue and writes his first noticeable poem, *London*, to describe and attack the chaos of the metropolis. Their responses are further set apart by the Great Fire of London (1666) which spawned new, albeit immaterialized, architectural plans to redesign the city. In what follows, attempt is made to demonstrate how both writers expressed their reactions to urban life, with rather similar ends but through different mediums.

## 2. Comic Space as Urban Space:<sup>2</sup> Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*

*The Alchemist* was not the first work in which Ben Jonson had addressed himself to city life. Indeed, in his fairly long career, Jonson seems to have been preoccupied with life as he found it in his native London. As Adam Zucker has shown, most of Jonson’s plays had as their setting some of the places in West End London: “*The Alchemist*, *Epicene*, *Bartholomew Fair*, *The Devil is an Ass*, *The Staple of News*, and *A Tale of a Tub* are all set within several miles of one another in the northern and western edges of the City of London and the area between the City walls and Westminster” (Zucker, 2010: 100). What distinguishes *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson (1964/[1738]), “London” in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, Vol. VI: *Poems*, E. L. McAdam Jr. and George Milne (eds.), New Haven and London: Yale University Press. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be indicated by line numbers in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Adam Zucker (2010), p. 104.

*Alchemist*, however, is Jonson's attempt at a systematic blending of three entities: the city/City of London<sup>1</sup>, his Blackfriars neighborhood – the setting of the play – and the house which he chooses for the action of the play. He effects this interconnection through a carefully devised plot which brings together city life and city types within a totality composed of closely interrelated parts. Moreover, the house (or, in fact, the stage) serves as both a microcosm and a macrocosm in that it represents a residence and the city at the same time. Thus, the play is configured as an organic whole in which urban space and theatrical space turn into interchangeable elements. Since this organic whole finds its most remarkable expression in the plot of the play, an analysis of the plot will help to reconstruct the workings and interconnections of these two spaces in *The Alchemist*.

Proclaiming himself a classicist, Jonson was quite conscious of the art of playwriting as a craft. And as a skillful craftsman, he devises a plot for *The Alchemist* which seems to be driven by clockwork. In this “clockwork plot,” as William Empson (1969: 596) has characterized it, Jonson strictly abides by the (in)famous Aristotelian unities of place, time and action<sup>2</sup>. The whole of the play occurs in only one setting; theatrical time is noticeably coordinated with real time so that, according to Sean McEvoy (2008: 102), “the time on stage claims to be the same minute of the same day in which the audience are alive”; and the play consists of one story line only: a satirical treatment of a number of characters in search of unlimited wealth and power, among others. To grasp the intricacies of Jonson's plot, it might be helpful to note that the principal unifying element on which he founds his work is, as Thomas M. Greene (1970: 325) has pointed out, “[t]he dual image of circle and centre [...]. The circle (suggesting perfection, harmony, equilibrium in cosmos, society, household, soul) is doubled by the centre (suggesting governor, king, house, inner self).” Thinking of the plot of *The Alchemist* in circular terms sheds light on the process in which the part/whole binary is dissolved into an organic unity that connects the city and the theater to each other, thus allowing the play performed on the stage to be intertwined with

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<sup>1</sup> I am using city/City to denote both the (commercial) core of London (The City) and its wider urban space including the suburbs and the so-called «liberties» (city).

<sup>2</sup> Although Aristotle put emphasis mainly on the unity of action, later Renaissance and neoclassicist commentators on his work extended this unity to both the time and place of a play.

daily performance of life in the city. However, the circle/center image needs to be further juxtaposed with the center/periphery dichotomy because, in a way, the play also foregrounds threatening forces which seem to maim the perfect unity of the circle. Read along the lines of these dominating images, the play turns out to be an arena in which centripetal and centrifugal forces (i.e., the center vs. the periphery) vie with each other for dominance. This point can be illustrated by a synopsis of the play.

In the absence of his master, a servant (Face) brings into the house a rogue (Subtle) and a prostitute (Dol Common) with whom he forms a “tripartite indenture” (V.iv.1.131)<sup>1</sup> to cozen some city gulls. In their scheme, Subtle plays the role of an alchemist who, constantly using the esoteric language of alchemy, pretends to have access to the Philosopher’s Stone. Face procures customers for Subtle – a number of citizens who seek the Stone or some other talisman to achieve instant success or unbounded wealth – and Dol helps the schemers further their plot by seducing the customers. The customers, or rather victims, include a clerk (Dapper), a tobacconist (Drugger), a knight (Sir Epicure Mammon), a Puritan (Ananias), a country boy (Kastril) and his widowed sister (Dame Pliant), who are one after the other fleeced by the charlatans and stripped of their money or property. Each scene is, in effect, a variation on the former with the difference that every new scene introduces a new character who is masterfully cozened like the previous ones. As the plot accumulates in intensity, the sense of corruption, moral decadence and social disintegration deepens more and more. In the final scene, Lovewit, the master (and center) of the house, returns home and Face (whose real name is Jeremy) like a good servant, chases Subtle and Dol out of the house and helps his master not only to usurp all the money the mountebanks have stolen but also to win the hand of Dame Pliant.

The London Jonson depicts in *The Alchemist* is plague-stricken. The plague (or “the sickness hot” as Jonson calls it in the “Argument” of the play) has forced Lovewit to flee from the city; at the same time, it has given Face the opportunity to transgress his duties as a servant and, instead of keeping the house in order, turn it

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson (1966/ [1610]), “*The Alchemist*” in *Three Comedies*, Michael Jamieson (ed.), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be indicated by act, scene and line numbers in the text.

into an agency for fraud. He has, in a way, invited the plague – albeit a social one, not the disease itself – into the house. Subtle, the alchemist, is symbolically the plague that has invaded the body of the city with his tricks and the stench of his fake chemical drugs. Located near one of the so-called “liberties” – i.e., districts of London outside City jurisdiction – Blackfriars is threatened by the periphery personified as Subtle and Dol Common. Face, quite tellingly, performs a mediatory role by shuttling back and forth between the centre and the periphery: as a schemer he is complicit with the subversive periphery which has unsettled the City, while as a servant, he reconnects himself with the centre by aiding his master put the house back in ‘order’.

As may be already evident from the names of the characters, each serves as a type and this makes it rather easy for the reader or audience to comprehend their personality. This element in the play attracts attention, at the same time, to its overlaps with allegorical morality plays. Indeed, Jonson’s play has been interpreted by some of its early commentators in Christian terms, as attested by Robert Knoll’s claim that “the whole play is a reworking of the Parable of the Talents” (Knoll, 1960: 460), or William Blissett’s suggestion that Face, Dol and Subtle “are the old enemies of mankind – The World, the Flesh, and the Devil” (Blissett, 1968: 323). In this function, the play is eventually claimed by moralists to be a stinging attack on those who have turned gold into their god. But read in the context of Jonson’s manifold references to the city, the play – with the master of the house absent – is also a commentary on a centreless society (or a disintegrating circle), a city growing in size and population and losing its grip on the underworld (the periphery) that is growing with it on a parallel line. Indeed, the religious or moralistic overtones of the play pale in comparison to its caustic social satire or its ideological implications, especially when we consider that Jonson has specifically set the play in London and has taken pains to identify certain city sites. As the “Prologue” of the play announces it:

Our scene is London, ’cause we would make known,  
No country’s mirth is better than our own.  
No clime breeds better matter for your whore,  
Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more,  
Whose manners, now call’d humours, feed the stage; (ll. 5-9)

The topography Jonson offers, with an array of taverns and disreputable areas, makes it impossible not to notice the interconnections of the city, its inhabitants, their desires and the social significance of theatrical performance.

In order to represent London, Jonson has recourse to two main strategies which we may call ‘topographical’ and ‘tropological’. By means of the topographical strategy, Jonson makes London come alive on the stage through his constant references to various public places in the city. These sites, as explained by Michael Jamison (1966: 191-316, 473-8) in the notes to his Penguin edition of *The Alchemist*, are specifically a number of taverns (Dagger, Woolsack, Three Pigeons, Heaven and Hell) and some notorious places (Madame Augusta’s, “a brothel”; Pict-hatch, “low district of London frequented by whores and pick-pockets”; Ratcliff, “a place in Stepney, frequented by sailors”). Via the tropological strategy, the playwright treats the city in a figurative language by identifying it with the stage, hence making the stage serve metonymically as London. A powerful aspect of the play is that Jonson complicates the boundaries between these two manners of representation in such a way that each comes to define the other; therefore, it is as if the actors were re-enacting scenes from daily life in the city. This blurring of boundaries has a double effect: on the one hand, the spectators are drawn into the play because everything seems so familiar to them; therefore, they can instantly identify with the characters on stage. On the other, the very distance that the physical structure of the theatre and the artificiality of the stage create allows the audience to securely watch the play and feel safe from its charlatans and their swindles. Commenting on this double effect, Cheryl Lynn Ross (1988: 457) interprets the play as both ideologically affirmative and socially subversive: the play reassures the audience through a process of “display and containment” that the anarchy they witness can be always brought under control by upper-class masters such as Lovewit, hence inviting the audience to feel protected by the law. In this way,

The play provides a comforting self-definition for the Lovewits of London, for it teaches them what they are not: they are not speakers of nonsense; they are not infected with Subtle’s plague; they are not gulls or dupes. The drama also shows them what they are: the guardians of intelligible speech and intelligent action (Ross, 1988: 457).

At the same time, since Lovewit, the respectable citizen, finally turns out to be as avaricious and unrelenting as Subtle, the underworld mountebank, in pursuing wealth and pleasure, the dividing line between them becomes so blurred that one may be easily replaced for the other. If Lovewit and Subtle could be so identical, then the play may be claimed to implicitly question “Lovewit’s natural right to govern” (ibid.). Thus, the play is both a confirmation and a negation: it confirms the ideological centralization of power in the hands of an upper-class figure such as Lovewit, while, simultaneously, it negates the eligibility of this class to rule.

*The Alchemist*, thus, shows how the City is prefigured by the margin it attempts to exclude. The Other, relegated to the periphery, is a perennial force that determines the extent to which the Self can be defined. The urban space of London is, likewise, indelibly intertwined with the satirically comic space of the play to highlight, as Sean McEvoy has aptly put it, “the theatricality of the world and the worldliness of theatre” (2008: 112).

### **3. Urban Space as Moral Space: Samuel Johnson’s *London***

In “Adventurer” no. 67, as Nicholas Hudson (2002: 594) reports, Samuel Johnson describes the initial reaction of a newcomer to London in these terms: “[A]n inhabitant of the remoter parts of the kingdom is immediately distinguished by a kind of dissipated curiosity, a busy endeavour to divide his attention amongst a thousand objects, and a wild confusion of astonishment and alarm”. This is, indeed, how Johnson himself had experienced, and responded to, London when he entered the city in 1737. Johnson’s response, nevertheless, was characterized more by alarm than astonishment. *London*, a poem Johnson published the next year, records his sense of alarm. The poem is a diatribe against the follies of a moribund society infected by corrupt politicians and insouciant foreigners as well as by what Johnson presents as its obsession with wealth.

*London*, as Johnson himself clarifies, is an imitation of the “Third Satire of Juvenal”. Juvenal’s satires, as Chris Baldick explains, are “fierce denunciations of his fellow-Romans in general and of women in particular for their mercenary lives.” Juvenalian satire is the type in which the poet assumes the persona of a morally indignant speaker who “bitterly condemns human vice and folly” (Baldick 2001: 132). The persona Johnson assumes in *London* is, likewise, that of a

rationalist philosopher he identifies as Thales who, enraged by the decadence prevalent in the city, sets out for a quiet spot far from the squalor, noise and hypocrisy of London.

Johnson's indignation with the city is expressed through a number of binary oppositions which determine the structure of his poem. The first of these oppositions is, as expressed in the very beginning of *London*, a spatial one: 'here' vs. 'there'. These two entities refer, respectively, to London, the city of vice, and the countryside or rural areas such as "Cambria's solitary shore" (l. 7) and "distant fields" where one can "breathe [...] a purer air" (l. 6). The spatial opposition is further intensified by a temporal one: 'now' vs. 'then'. The London of the poem, as it is 'now', is undergoing a deteriorating process, losing its touch with its glorious past which back 'then', at the time of Queen Elizabeth, or even earlier, during the reign of King Alfred, was the period of its ascendancy toward becoming a powerful, dominating nation:

Struck with the seat that gave Eliza birth  
We kneel, and kiss the consecrated earth  
In pleasing dreams the blissful age renew  
And call Britannia's glories back to view (ll. 23-26).

This yearning for the splendours of the past leads automatically to another duality: 'patriotism' vs. 'xenophobia'. England is now polluted by foreigners, mainly the French and the Spanish, who "Obsequious, artful, voluble and gay/On Britain's fond credulity [...] prey" (ll. 111-112).

The main cause of the disease that threatens London (and England), as Johnson diagnoses it, is the unwise policies of the Whig party under Sir Robert Walpole (1676-1745). As a staunch Tory, Johnson associates himself with Bolingbroke, an ex-refugee who "returned to England in 1725 and attempted to forge a new 'Country' party designed to transcend traditional Whig-Tory divisions by appealing to both moderate Whigs and moderate Tories through its criticism of the corruption of the Walpole administration" (Venturo 2006: 253). Sticking to the party agenda, Johnson denounces the London that has been surrendered to fraud, sham, and the betrayal of constitutional priorities:

Here [...] those reign, whom pensions can incite,  
To vote a patriot black, a courtier white,  
Explain their country's dear-bought rights away  
And plead for pirates in the face of day,



With slavish tenets taint our poison'd youth  
And lend a lye [*sic*] the confidence of truth. (ll. 51-55)

As may have now become clear from the main pronouncements of the poem, Johnson's London, as Ben Jonson's London, is a city threatened by a social plague. But unlike Jonson, Samuel Johnson does not follow a topographical aim. In his monologic poem, Johnson confines geographical specificities to a few entities such as the river Thames, Greenwich (Queen Elizabeth's birthplace) and Tyburn, where public hangings were undertaken. Some other regions beyond London – Kent or the Scottish Highlands, for instance – are also mentioned but they serve mainly as a haven to which the exhausted speaker/poet wishes to retire from the hustle and bustle of the ungovernable, corrupt city. The main themes of the poem are, indeed, universal enough to be applied to other national contexts. This tendency emanates in the first place from the fact that the poem is an imitation in which Juvenal's Rome has been substituted with mid-eighteenth-century London. Johnson's overarching aim, thus, is to give voice to moral indignation and to reflect ethically on London's sufferings. "The ethic of *London*," as Edward and Lillian Bloom (1971: 122) remark, "is predicated upon what is for its author a Christian truism: that responsibility for any act must be fixed in the doer. Early in his poem, therefore, [Johnson] expanded the theme of his Juvenalian original in order to anchor the major source of evil in man himself – in his thinking and passions". Furthermore, Johnson himself was new to the city and, given the vicissitudes of a country-boy's life in the metropolis, he could not relish the many pleasures that may have lain in store for him. A topographically unspecified London, therefore, better suits an obscure man who is at a loss as to what course his life shall take.

As Johnson settles in London, he seems, however, to start to identify his life with the city. The London he had entered had, after all, experienced a calamity in 1666. The Great Fire that had raged through London for five days had demolished about 80 percent of the city. This catastrophe, had, nonetheless, resulted in some positive changes. As Magdalena Alanga (2004: 6-7) explains, "[t]he Great Fire burnt the small, crowded houses that were made of poor material. With these houses gone, builders could make plans to construct better, safer houses [...]. The fire also burnt up a lot of the rats that were responsible for spreading the bubonic plague."

Immediately after the Fire, architects such as Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723) came up with plans to build a shapely, geometrically-divided London. Such plans reflected neoclassical inclinations for order and mathematical thinking with high investments in abstract notions. The inhabitants of London, however, did not favour these plans and, instead, preferred to rebuild London more according to their commercial priorities than neoclassical imperatives. As Nicholas Hudson (2002: 583) notes,

Resisting *a priori* planning from above, hostile to any attempt to infringe on their preciously guarded endowments of “liberty and property,” Londoners ultimately rejected civic plans that would have made the capital a pompous exhibition of royal power and rational ideals. Instead, London grew as an uneven patchwork of squares, parks, and bridges evolving in immediate response to the changing practical needs of the people and an economy fueled by Britain’s expanding empire.

Rather than succumb to the mechanical plans of the architects, London grew as a dynamic organism that seemed to be throbbing with the lives of its inhabitants. Along with London’s gradual growth, Johnson’s reputation increased to such extent that he eventually became a towering literary and cultural figure who gave his name to the age in which he was living. His later comments and writings, especially in his periodical essays, celebrated the abundance and variety of city life as he enjoyed them.

To understand this shift, it might be useful to turn to one of the keywords in Johnson’s literary and cultural criticism (cf. Hudson). In the “Preface” to his edition of Shakespeare (1765), Johnson finds fault with some passages in the Bard, which he condemns for their bombastic language. But he finally gives the highest rank to Shakespeare because Shakespeare’s work is, to Johnson, the embodiment of ‘nature’<sup>1</sup>. Though not very clearly defined, ‘nature’, for Johnson, seems to have close affinities with ‘human nature’<sup>2</sup>: irregular and wayward but authentic and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nicholas Hudson (2002), p. 588.

<sup>2</sup> “Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirrour of manners and of life. [...] His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species”. Samuel Johnson

comprehensive. This conception of nature, ultimately, becomes a major yardstick with which Johnson measures almost all (literary) phenomena<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, he comes to relinquish the views that do not favour the ‘natural’ outgrowth of the city and prefers, instead, to rejoice in its labyrinthine architecture of back alleys and narrow streets which seem to him to reflect the immensity of (human) nature itself. This view is repeatedly reflected in his conversations with his biographer, James Boswell:

Talking of London, he [Johnson] observed, Sir, if you wish to have a just notion of the magnitude of this city, you must not be satisfied with seeing its great streets and squares, but must survey the innumerable little lanes and courts. It is not in the showy evolutions of buildings, but in the multiplicity of human habitations which are crowded together, that the wonderful immensity of London exists. (quoted in Hudson, 2002: 589).

Urban consciousness does, in this way, make a realistic impact on Johnson the moralist: the latter-day London invites him to celebrate the fecundity of human nature as much as the London of 1738 incited him to indignation at human folly.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Although Ben Jonson and Samuel Johnson practiced two different types of literary writing, their awareness of urban space brings them together under one heading. Both are city writers and both foreground the city with their artistic responses: Ben Jonson uses drama to stage London; Samuel Johnson uses poetry and prose to construct it. At the same time, both writers are fashioned by the city they inhabit: Ben Jonson cannot be dissociated from the London topography that informs his

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(1792/[1765]), “Preface to Shakespeare” in *The Works of Samuel Johnson, A New Edition, In Twelve Volumes*, London: Printed for T. Longman, B. Whiteman and Son, et al., Vol.2, pp.80-81.

<sup>1</sup> Johnson’s attack on Metaphysical poetry for what he thinks to be its ‘false wit’ is premised on the same criterion: “If the father of criticism has rightly denominated poetry *tekhnē mimētikē*, an imitative art, these writers [i.e., Metaphysical poets] will without great wrong lose their right to the name of poets, for they cannot be said to have imitated anything: they neither copied nature nor life; neither painted the forms of matter nor represented the operations of intellect”. Samuel Johnson (1805/[1779]), “Life of Cowley” in *The Lives of the most Eminent English Poets, with Critical Observations on their Works*, London: Printed at the Stanhope Press, Vol. 1, p. 20.

work and his presence may be easily detected in the city sites he catalogues; Samuel Johnson grows along with London to cultivate a mentality that cherishes the city for what it is – not for who may govern it. In their different ways, then, the works of both writers attest to the fact that literature is as significant a force in constructing the city as the city is in determining the protocols of literary representation.

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