

THE ALCHEMIST.

VVritten
by
BEN. IONSON.

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Contentus paucis lectoribus.*

LONDON,
Printed by *Thomas Snodham*, for *Walter Burre*,
and are to be sold by *John Stepneih*, at the
West-end of Paules.
1612.

Shannel Grant (2114642)

Error and Sweet Violence: Shakespeare and Renaissance Comedy and Tragedy

Assignment #1: Written Exercise on early textual history and performance

**TRANSCRIPTION OF THE TITLE PAGE OF BEN JOHNSON'S *THE ALCHEMIST* IN ORIGINAL AND
MODERN TYPOGRAPHY**

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FORMAT

The format of the earliest edition of Ben Johnson's *the Alchemist*, which was first published in 1612, is identified as 4° with 48 leaves unnumbered¹. This is evident by the indications placed at the bottom right corner of the page with the first word of the text which should follow.

¹ Walter Wilson Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration*, 4 Vols (London: Bibliographical Society, 1939), III, 440.

THE EARLY TEXTUAL HISTORY AND PERFORMANCE HISTORY OF *THE ALCHEMIST*

In this discursive document, I seek to provide bibliographical information pertaining to the early publication and performance history of *The Alchemist* by Ben Johnson. In order to do so, I will firstly, provide information about the printers, publishers, booksellers, and location of their respective bookshops with regards to the 1612, 1616 and 1640 editions of the play. Secondly, I will also make references to the textual differences and issues that arise in the editions, as well as, if there is any evidence of correction or revision. Thirdly, I will look at the performance history of *The Alchemist* by stating the date of performance, and the location of the first play, the list of actors and acting company. Lastly, I will conclude this research.

The first recorded documentation of *The Alchemist* that exists is that of entry in the Stationer's Register dated October 03rd 1610². The entry was made by Walter Burre, the publisher of the earliest printed edition of the play and it was granted a license by Sir George Bucke and the Wardens. The entry simply refers to a 'Comoedy called *The Alchymist* by Ben: Johnson'³. There is no record of a printed copy from this year, only a note on the 1616 folio indicating that it was acted in 1610. One explanation for this may be due to the rise of the bubonic plague between 1603-1610. The 1610 edition may have either been burnt or placed on hold until after the plague passed. In the first printed edition, in the year 1612, the title's spelling was changed to '*The Alchemist*', and was printed by Thomas Snodham for Burre, and sold by John Stepneth. Stepneth's shop was called the Crane and it was located at the west end of St. Paul's Churchyard between two shops, the Black Bear which was an extension of the Crane at one point and the White Greyhound⁴. Burre also operated at the Crane from 1604, and quite possibly was a business partner of Stepneth who occupied the premises from 1609 until 1612⁵.

The second printed edition appeared in 1616, in a collection entitled '*The Workes of Beniamin Johnson*'. Prior to its publication, there was an entry made in the Stationer's Register on January 20th 1615, by William Stansby, the printer of the play and it was granted a license by Master John Traverer with a note in brackets stating that the collection was of 'certain masques of the court, never yet printed'⁶. The collection was sold by Richard Meighen, who was Stansby's bookseller and whose name is not included on the published cover but rather is only mentioned in the variant title of this collection. This is most likely because he was a part of the enterprise to profit from the sale of a portion of the books, suggesting the popularity of Johnson's plays⁷. Meighen's shop was located under St. Clement's Church in London.

The last edition that will be considered for this time frame is the 1640 collection entitled, '*The Workes of Benjamin Johnson*'. This was printed by Richard Bishop and sold by Andrew Croke, who

² Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed*, III, p. 440.

³ Edward Arber, *A Transcript of the Stationers' Registers 1554-1640*, 5 Vols (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1967), III, 201.

⁴ Peter W. M., Blayney, *The Bookshops in Paul's Cross Churchyard* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1990), p. 27-28.

⁵ Ronald Brunlees McKerrow and Harry Gidney Aldis, *Dictionary of Printers and Booksellers in England, Scotland, and Ireland and of Foreigners Printers of English Books 1557-1640* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1968), p. 56.

⁶ Arber, *A Transcript*, III, p. 258.

⁷ Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama*, III, p. 1072.

was employed as a bookseller before becoming a prominent publisher⁸. Crooke's bookshop was called the Green Dragon and it was located at St. Paul's Churchyard from 1630-1674. The shop was situated between two other shops, the Holy Spirit, and the Sun. There is an entry in the Stationer's Register dated March 04th 1639, which documents the transfer by deed of sale of the 1616 printed works of Ben Johnson with the consent of his widow to Bishop. There were also entries between the period of 1621-1635 in the Stationer's Register that documented the transfer of a publisher's assets to another. On July 03rd 1630, John Spencer, who was an apprentice of Walter Burre received the portion belonging to Burre's wife including a copy of *The Alchemist*, which he printed in 1630. Burre's portion was transferred to William Stansby by note on June 10th 1621 and it was entered in the Register on July 04th 1635. Stansby re-printed the play in 1621 and 1635.

In comparison of the three editions, the 1612 publication differs to a greater extent from the other two editions in which the play is contained. This is due to the fact that the play was reprinted from the 1616 edition and thus corrections and variations were altered on it making it of a similitude to the 1640 edition. For instance, the title pages of the 1616 and 1640 are similar in that they follow similar formatting styles and contain the same information about the play with regards to the Latin inscription, and state that the play was acted in 1610 by the King's Majesty's Servants. The 1612 edition of the play is simplistic in its design, which was most likely due to a sales tactic implemented by Burre, as it was the same stylistic approach used for a portion of Johnson's previously printed plays⁹. There is also a different Latin inscription and no subtitles dictating the history of the play.

A textual difference that exists between the 1612 in comparison with the 1616 and 1640 texts is with regards to the epistle to Lady Mary Wroth which was changed from, 'To the Lady most aequall with vertue and her Blood: The Grace, and Glory of women Lady Mary Wroth', to 'To the Lady, most deseruing her Name, and Bloud: Lady Mary Wroth'¹⁰. Additionally, the note by George Lucy and the note to the reader in the 1612 edition are not found in the latter ones. Some pages of the text were misprinted and this most likely due to the error in the placement of the indicator for the quarto pages when it went through the press. The evidence to support this is found on the play's pages where there is a difference between the indicator and the first word at the top of the following page. The word printed by the publisher at the bottom was act as a template as to where certain pages were to be printed. For example, page 3E3 was misprinted as 2E3 in the 1616 folio because of a mis-sign on the leaf¹¹. The text has evidence of a substantial number of grammatical corrections, and this most likely occurred while it was going through the printing press. Whether this was done by Johnson is unclear, but it is evident that he had a keen interest in the publication of his works. However, if the corrections were not made by him, then the editor was familiar with Johnson's style of writing¹².

The exact date of the first performance of *The Alchemist* is opened for debate since the plague resulted in the closure of playhouses and theatre companies went on tour to the countryside. The play's speculative date is believed to be anywhere between November and December 1610 when

⁸ Henry R. Plomer, *A Dictionary of the booksellers and printers who were at work in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1641 to 1667* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1968), p. 56-57.

⁹ Zachary Lesser, *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication: Readings in the English Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 57-61.

¹⁰ Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed*, III, p. 440-442.

¹¹ Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed*, III, p. 441.

¹² Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed*, III, p. 1072.

playhouses were reopening. However, a translation of a Latin letter by a gentleman named Henry Jackson to his friend indicates that the play may have been performed as early as September of that year.¹³ The play was the first one to be performed at the Blackfriars playhouse after its opening in Oxford by the King's men, a company to which Ben Johnson belonged as well as his contemporary, William Shakespeare. The venue was convenient as it allowed Johnson to create the atmosphere of the *Alchemist* since they performed in a room in the playhouse.

The 1616 folio lists the actors who performed *The Alchemist*, and it is possible that they were involved in the 1610 performance. The men who performed the play were Richard Burbage, John Lowin, Henry Condell, Alexander Cooke, Robert Armin, John Hemings, William Ostler, John Underwood, Nicholas Tooley and William Eglestone¹⁴. Subsequent court performances were held in 1612-1613, 1623 and throughout the 1630's. Greg also indicates that this list of actors was 'repeated in later collections', possibly up until their death or retirement in the 1630's.

In conclusion, I have provided my findings on the early textual and performance history of the *Alchemist*. I have provided the list of publications from 1612, 1616 and 1640 and for each listed the publishers, printers and booksellers as well as their shops. In addition, I have mentioned the textual differences and whether there is evidence of revision. Lastly, I have presented the information that I found with regards to the play's performance history.

¹³ *Shakespeare Documented* (2020)

<<https://shakespearedocumented.folger.edu/resource/document/excerpts-henry-jacksons-letter-recording-performance-othello-oxford>> [Accessed 25 January 2023].

¹⁴ Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed*, III, p. 1265.

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Reference List

1. Arber, Edward *A Transcript of the Stationers' Registers 1554-1640*, 5 Vols (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1967)
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3. Greg, Walter Wilson, *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration*, 4 Vols (London: Bibliographical Society, 1939)
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5. Lesser, Zachary, *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication: Readings in the English Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
6. McKerrow, Ronald Brunlees and Harry Gidney Aldis, *Dictionary of Printers and Booksellers in England, Scotland, and Ireland and of Foreigners Printers of English Books 1557-1640* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1968)
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8. *Shakespeare Documented* (2020)
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