

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

The Alchemist (1640)

Ben Jonson

The Alchemist. 1640

Ben Jonson

The Alchemist was first produced thirty four years after the establishment of the first legitimate public theater in London, and with its great and lasting success can be said to mark the genuine arrival of theater at the heart of London life.

OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND of religious censure, The Alchemist was first produced thirty four years after the establishment of the first legitimate public theater in London, and with its great and lasting success can be said to mark the genuine arrival of theater at the heart of London life. The entertainment seeking public had sufficient cash in pocket, and a stable of well known actors were proving to be reliable billboard draws, widely known and appreciated even outside London. In the present play Jonson follows a pattern congenial to the London audience, sticking to his version of faith in the three dramatic unities, presenting a tight construct of events opening and closing around the departure and return of a central but often not present figure, a bevy of recurrent visitors to a single locale—the fraudulent business of Subtle, Face, and Dol—a return of those same visitors, Intent on cashing in on promises made to them—a dissolution of those promises, as reality catches up with the fraudsters—the return of the master of the house, after his flight from the plague, and a restoration of order in the London house; at which point the housekeeper Jeremy, who confesses to Lovewit, and is pardoned on the understanding that he will find a suitable bride (Dame Pliant) for the master, while the other miscreants achieve pardon or the opportunity to vanish into the background. The final effect, to repeat, is a drama built around the classical unities of time and place, a truly wrap around achievement, leaving the spectators with a sense that malfeasance has been put in its place, but enjoyed to the degree appropriate to a comedy, and that some kind of stasis has been restored to the chaotic and bubbling-over profusion of moral confusions, around which the play develops.

CHARACTERS

Subtle, the Alchemist
Face, the Housekeeper
Dol Common, a prostitute, their colleague
Dapper, a Clerk
Druggier, a tobaccoman
Lovewit, Master of the House
Epicure Mammon, a Knight
Surlly, a gamester
Tribulation, a pastor of Amsterdam
Ananias, a deacon there
Kastril, the angry boy
Dame Pliant, his sister: a widow

SYNOPSIS

A gentleman, Lovewit, finds himself caught in London during a year of plague in the city, and is forced to flee to the countryside, leaving his City house under the care of his manservant Jeremy. Jeremy takes the opportunity to turn His master's dwelling into a den for fraudulent deeds, and dirty deceptions.

Calling himself Captain Face, and enlisting the aid of a fellow conman, to be called Subtle, he adds a third conspirator, a prostitute named Dol Common, to round out the unscrupulous trio.

The action opens with a violent quarrel between Subtle and Face, over the disposition of the riches they plan to accumulate in their dirty enterprises. Dol manages to convince the other two that they need to cooperate, work as a team, and before long they have before them their first victim, a clerk named Dapper, who wants Subtle to use his necromantic skills to help Dapper with his gambling fortunes. It is agreed that Dapper may find special favors from the Queen of Fairy, but only at the price of submitting himself to various sexually degrading experiences. We begin right away therefore, to see what a dirty trio we are dealing with.

As one expects, a sequence of dubious characters, each marked with Jonson's striking care for the eccentric and reckless, follows Dapper onto the stage of impropriety. Sir Epicure Mammon is the next potential customer, an unsatisfied man of wealth, who wants alchemical access to the philosopher's stone, which he trusts will make him richer and immortal. (He is accompanied by his skeptical associate, Surly, who is more than dubious of Subtle's skills—fraudulent alchemy, in Surly's opinion. Among other sordid developments, Subtle and Face catch wind of the arrival, intown, of a certain wealthy widow, Dame Pliant, whom they agree to put under their powers.

At this point we enter the realm of paybacks. The fake alchemists, who have occupied Lovewit's Mansion, have made several false promises, and will have to answer for their fraudulence. Gulled Anabaptists return to reclaim goods which would, they had been promised, by this time have been transmuted into gold. No such luck! Dapper returns, and is told that he will soon meet the Queen of Fairy. A young man, Kastril, arrives to tap Subtle's alleged powers of match making, but is turned away. Face and Subtle, not surprisingly, topple back into a violent argument over which of them is to win Dame Pliant.

The end game of this 'alchemical farce' plays out into what is in the end truly a farce, involving rival competitors for Dame Pliant's hand, our friend Surly returns as a fierce Spanish nobleman, Anabaptist gulls are given Jonson's scorn—as they had been in Bartholomew Fair—and, then, in the middle of the furor Dol rushes in with the news that the master of the house, Lovewit, has returned. The hectic party is over.

Jonson has crafted everything, down to the return of Lovewit, so as to bring to a classical close this most praised of the author's dramas. Jeremy returns to his straight faced professional self, assuring his boss that the house has remained closed and quiet during its owner's absence. Events however immediately conspire to make Jeremy the fool and soon the whipping boy—though in the end Lovewit forgives him. Face apologizes to the audience for the series of tricks that have been played on the master of the house. With that said—remember the play is a comedy—things turn out pretty smoothly for the motley, and in a sense 'otherworldly' characters who have been summoned up before our eyes—like the once missing characters in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Lovewit marries Dame Pliant, and takes Mammon's goods; Kastril accepts his sister's marriage to Lovewit; the lesser bad guys are dismissed, leaving disconsolately, while the ultimate folly of humanity is left in the same aerial space in which Shakespeare leaves it, at the conclusion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*.

SCENES

Jonson is at his best. In the present play, in shaping his argument into discrete units. The macro shape of *The Alchemist* would have the play divided into four or five sections, bookended by the departure of Master Lovewit for the country, and his subsequent return at the end of the plague season.

The coagulation of Subtle, the Captain, and Dol is slow. The three fraudsters and con men find themselves in violent conflict, after Master leaves, and the house is open for exploitation. Dol eventually brings the two co-conspirators to their senses, holding out the promise of gain and satisfied greed.

News spreads fast, that the three shady characters are up for business in Jeremy's master's mansion; a series of self-interested and under the law characters passes through the house, each with his own angle: Dapper, Druggier, Mammon, Dame Pliant become virtual stage properties, flitting in and out of the

mansion, scheming to benefit from Subtle's alchemical know how, or hot deals in the crooked markets growing apace with the commercialization of London. Even Jonson's pet whipping boys, the Anabaptists, make their appearance, hoping for an alchemical change of ordinary goods into gold.

Disappointment might well be the name of the Following chapter. Greed, lust, cheap ambition have all put in an appearance at Jeremy's house, and all have left relying on major returns on their investments, their pleas for quick transformation of dross into gold. Jonson has already built his denouement into the fabric of his play. We are awaiting some kind of resolution, and lo it sets in with the return of Master Lovewit.

The rats fly in all directions. Lovewit has been royally deceived. The neighbors report that any amount of suspicious behavior has been flowing through his mansion, in his absence. Jeremy has to confess all, but, as we know from the rustic comedic turn in the comic tradition, some kind of reasonably benign resolution is in the offing. The scattered fragments of the empire of greed and lust vanish into thin air, and despite a few happy turns—Lovewit finds a bride in Dame Pliant—caustic but good humored mockery carries the day.

THEMES

Alchemy Transformation It was the hard science of the Middle Ages, imagination created, built around a quest for the philosopher's stone, a mythical substance with the ability to transform base metals into precious ones, especially gold, but to confer many collateral benefits, such as long life, good health, and immortality. The background of this belief mounts from antiquity, expresses itself in many of the great religions, east and west, and was in fact attributed to Adam himself, as founder. By the time of Jonson, 'early modernity' in the west, there was still room for genuine belief in the alchemical world view, but the origins of empirical science were gradually squeezing out the alchemical perspective, and leaving just enough wiggle room, inside the perspective, for treatments like Jonson's, wry, sarcastic, but still within the orbit of the archaic tradition.

Folly is the name of the game in this play, and with it greed and conflict. Jonson opens his play masterfully, informing us that Master Lovewit has fled London, in fear of the plague—a not uncommon happening there, and one which in 1665-6 was to prove a huge disaster for the entire city of London, as we know from Pepys' Journal of the Plague Year (1665). The house is left in charge of Jeremy, the housekeeper, who rapidly lets out his darkest self, gathers to him two potential—and soon actual—partners in fraud, with whom he will continue, throughout the play, to give full meaning to the notion of Folly, that human blemish which will prove thematically central, in western literature, showing its shameless face from Menander through Petronius in antiquity, and blossoming into such rich human portraitures as we find in Pepys, Swift, Pope, and Evelyn Waugh in the English tradition.

Fraud, of course, is the other face of folly, for only the gullibility, of the greedy seekers who request Subtle's 'business,' would support the obvious pie-in-the-sky fraud that Subtle and Face concoct. The disintegration of the alchemical tradition, which in the Middle Ages interacted with medical theory, had reduced the claims of the alchemists to those of easy come easy go magicians, with the result that many clients of the alchemical trade were prepared to invest in pure hearsay nostrums, the seventeenth century's version of the medical promiscuousness of our nightly television channels. The anti Puritan twist is the unique cachet of Jonson's anti fraudulence intensity in the present play—as also in Bartholomew Fair, where mockery of Puritans is a constant plot driver. We are close to the time, in the case either of The Alchemist or of Bartholomew Fair, of closure of the theaters in London (1642), not to mention of the blatant crushing of the free speeches of drama throughout England. Jonson, like John Milton in Areopagitica, was no friend of supervised or clamped down expression in the arts.

The **urban** becomes a theme in Jonson's work, as, for instance, it was not in Shakespeare. For Shakespeare the city, as a place where commerce concentrated, capital accumulation invited investment on all sides, and international trade affected markets, was not yet a reality. Fifty years after Shakespeare's death, farther into the international, exploration, and market economy, the society of England had developed a major capitol, London, and a rapid growth of the urban spirit in general. As we

surmise from the play before us, London will by mid seventeenth century have become a pre modern industrial city, with the complex ills of the modern city buried not far underground.