

THE
ALCHEMIST.

A Comædie.

Acted in the yeere 1610. By the
Kings MAIESTIES
Seruants.

The Author B. I.

LVCRET.

*— petere inde coronam,
Vnde prius nulli velarint tempora Musa.*

LONDON,
Printed by WILLIAM STANSBY

M. D. C. XVI.

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Motto

'To seek the Muses' garland where no one has won it
before' (Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*,
IV.1).

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Sources

The classical lines of the construction of *The Alchemist* are evident in its scrupulous regard for the unities and in its Aristophanic scheme of a central fantastic project which brings the various characters together at a common centre. There is a specific structural debt in Act V to Plautus's *Mostellaria* (*The Haunted House*) in which a master returns home to find his servant attempting to prevent him from entering the house, and from finding the disorder which has taken place in his absence, by pretending that the house is haunted. The main action may owe something to Lucian's satirical biography *Alexander*, in which a charlatan sets up a fake oracle and attracts crowds of credulous visitors, but essentially its design remains Jonson's own invention, a triumph of multiple plotting.

There was a long tradition of satire on alchemy, particularly as a topos illustrative of man's perennial willingness to be deceived. Alchemists had been lampooned in the Italian *commedia erudita*, but Jonson was more likely to have been conscious of precedents in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* of Chaucer, and in Erasmus's colloquy *Alcumistica* (in which the gull is as much the object of laughter as the rogue). Doubtless he took much from observation and experience. The Tudor and Stuart periods saw a series of cheaters who claimed to be in touch with the fairies, and the Dapper plot builds on the actual experiences of one Thomas Rogers, who had given money in the hope of marriage with the Queen of the Fairies, which became public knowledge in 1609. Jonson claimed that he had once disguised himself as an astrologer 'in a long gown and a white beard' and had been visited by a gullible lady (Herford and Simpson, I, p. 141).

Jonson's alchemical expertise was genuine. He drew on many authorities: Arnald of Villanova, Geber, Paracelsus, Robertus Vallensis, Sendivogius and Martin del Rio, besides a German collection of treatises *De Alchemia* (1541) and English writings by George Ripley and (attributed to) Roger Bacon. His borrowings are set out in full in Herford and Simpson's commentary. He presented the theory of alchemy with a minimum of distortion, and told William Drummond he knew how to 'set horoscopes, but trusts not in them' (Herford and Simpson, I, p. 141).

Dol's ravings in IV.v were adapted from *A Concoct of Scripture* (1590), a treatise on biblical chronology by the Puritan Hugh Broughton.

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Stage history

The play was intended for the Blackfriars playhouse in the autumn of 1610, for it contains many details of time and place carefully designed to create an illusion of exact contemporaneity (see especially III.ii.129–32, which dates the action of the play to 1 November). But the plague may have prevented any London performance before mid November, and the first record of performance is at Oxford in September, where it received ‘very great applause . . . Our religious men, shame to say, flocked there most eagerly’ (Herford and Simpson, IX, p. 224).

The Alchemist has had the most dazzling success on stage of all Jonson’s plays, and has a virtually continuous history down to 1815. It was seen at court in 1613 and 1623, and is mentioned as revived again in 1631 and 1639, by which time it had also reached Dublin. Several Caroline comedies show plain signs of indebtedness to it. It continued to be current while the playhouses were closed from 1642 to 1660 in a short ‘droll’ or abridgement, for casual or surreptitious staging.

After the Restoration, *The Alchemist* became one of the principal ‘old stock’ plays of the King’s Company, with Clun (later Wintershall) playing Subtle, Mohun as Face, and Lacy as Ananias. Dryden defended his failure to punish his vicious characters in *An Evening’s Love* (1671) by citing the precedent of Face; Jeremy Collier replied (in 1698) that Jonson had made Face apologise for the lapse in decorum. There are no records of performance between 1675 and 1701, but by 1709 Richard Steele was calling it ‘as great a masterpiece as has ever appeared by any hand’.¹

Between 1709 and 1776 the play was continually in vogue; the South Sea Bubble (1720) gave it a special topicality. Cibber achieved particular success in his portrayal of Druggier (1731–46), but he was outshone by Garrick whose performance in this role was legendary. A contemporary described it as ‘the ridiculous above all conception’:

When he first opens his mouth, the features of his face seem, as it were, to drop upon his tongue; it is all caution; it is timorous, stammering, and inexpressible. When he stands under the conjuror to have his features examined, his teeth, his beard, his little finger, his awkward simplicity, and his concern, mixed with hope

1 R. G. Noyes, *Ben Jonson on the English Stage*, 1935, p. 112.

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and fear, and joy and avarice, and good-nature,
 are above painting.²

Drugger was given extra business, including the accidental breaking of a urine-bottle in Act I (which originated with Cibber), and a prominent part in the baffling of Surly in IV.vii (which seems to have turned into a boxing match). In other respects the play was shortened by 900 lines, and its vulgarities excised.

Garrick played the role until 1776, and Drugger's popularity inspired a farcical abridgement of the play centring on him, *The Tobacconist* by Francis Gentleman (1770), a sequel, *The Pantheonites* (1773), and a comic monologue, *Abel Drugger's Return from the Fete Champetre at Marylebone Gardens* (1774). One enterprising London tobacconist named his shop the Abel Drugger. A revival of *The Tobacconist* with Edmund Kean as Drugger marks the last trace of *The Alchemist* before its revival by Poel's English Stage Company in 1899.

Notable modern revivals have included the Malvern Festival production, with Ralph Richardson as Face, in 1932, and the Old Vic Theatre Company production, at the New Theatre in 1947, again with Richardson as Face, but on this occasion outshone by another remarkable Drugger, that of Alec Guinness:

his wistful, happy eyes moving, in dumb wonder from Face to Subtle: a solid little fellow, you felt, and how eager to help. At last he puts in a tolerable contribution to the conversation. *O altitudo!* His face creases ruddily into modest delight, and he stamps his thin feet in glee.³

Tyrone Guthrie's 1962 Old Vic production, with Charles Gray as Mammon and Leo McKern as Subtle, was disastrously modernised. Stuart Burge's New Theatre production (1970) featured a revolving house, vaudeville plate-juggling and bravura quick changes. The outstanding recent revival has been by the Royal Shakespeare Company (1977), 'at top speed and point-blank range on a diminutive trick set', with Ian McKellen as a 'greasy and mean' Face, John Woodvine 'grim and misanthropic' as Subtle, and Trevor Nunn directing, in a version adapted by Peter Barnes.⁴ The Marlowe Society at Cambridge in 1982

2 R. V. Holdsworth (ed.), *Jonson's 'Every Man in His Humour' and 'The Alchemist': A Casebook*, 1978, p. 220.

3 K. Tynan, *A View of the English Stage*, 1975, p. 67.

4 *The Times*, 15 May 1977; *New Statesman*, 1977, p. 908.

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broke the play's back by putting the interval between Acts IV and V.

The text

The play appeared first in quarto in 1612, and was overhauled by Jonson for its appearance in the 1616 folio. Many of the changes were made to avoid some of the play's more blatant profanities. I have followed the corrected state of the folio text, but I have restored the obviously superior quarto reading at I.ii.56. The edition of C. M. Hathaway (1903) was superseded by Herford and Simpson, and the most important subsequent editions are those of Douglas Brown (*New Mermaids*, 1966), F. H. Mares (*Revels*, 1968), S. Musgrove (*Fountainwell*, 1968) and Alvin B. Kernan (Yale, 1974). Mares's and Kernan's editions include particularly fine introductions and useful accounts of alchemy. A facsimile of the 1612 quarto has been published by the Scolar Press (Menston, 1970).

A note on alchemy

Alchemy – the quest for the manufacture of the Philosophers' Stone (actually a powder) which could transmute base metals into gold (or, as an elixir, could rejuvenate and prolong life) – had its roots in the sophisticated metallurgical, cosmetic, glass and dyeing industries of ancient Egypt and the Middle East. It flourished at Alexandria and in the Islamic empire, eventually reaching Europe in the twelfth century.

Material transmutation was theoretically possible in the universe as described by Aristotle since all substances were believed to have a common origin in an indeterminate primal matter. This, impressed with varying qualities of hot, cold, moist and dry, produced substances which differed according to their varying proportions of the basic elements of earth, air, fire and water. In gold, the four elements were in a condition of perfect balance, and imperfect substances were capable of transmutation into gold by the adjustment of the balance of their elements. Moreover, metals were understood to be generated from exhalations trapped inside the earth, and hence could be reproduced artificially within the laboratory.

In outline, the alchemical work seems to have consisted of resolving a mineral substance to its basic elements, purging and refining these, then recombining and 'nourish-

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ing' them at length until the pure Essence was generated. In practice it was rarely so simple, this outline becoming a bewildering array of often-repeated distillations, solutions, crystallisations, condensations, coagulations and so forth. Mercury and sulphur were prominently employed, since they were believed to be constituents of all metals, yet not in their naturally occurring states but in ideal 'sophic' forms. Some twelve steps in the work were generally recognised, involving a series of degrees of heat in the furnace and sequential colour-changes in the magisterium, but there was general vagueness about details and a chaos of conflicting opinion over procedure. Suffice it to say the process was long, expensive, smelly and futile.

The confusion was compounded by the esoteric nature of the literature of alchemy, which was understood as a repository of ancient and secret wisdom, and heavily infected with the language and concerns of astrology, Neoplatonism and Cabbalism. In the recondite and picturesque symbolism of the treatises, substances were designated after the planets which governed them, or after kings and queens, lions, dragons, hermaphrodites and toads, etc., and chemical processes were recounted as births, mutilations, digestions, copulations and drownings. All writers believed alchemy to have a spiritual dimension: the miraculous transformations, refinements, deaths and resurrections which took place in the crucible carried mystical signification, just as scriptural fables or classical myths could be interpreted alchemically. For some adepts, for whom it was entirely a spiritual science, the stone would not be discovered until such time as they had – ironically – lost the desire for worldly wealth altogether.

The theoretical basis of the science was exploded in the seventeenth century, but alchemical textbooks are still being written, and Jonson, for one, was clearly fascinated by it. There are sane and informative introductions by J. Read (*Prelude to Chemistry*, 1936) and E. J. Holmyard (*Alchemy*, 1957). C. A. Burland's *The Arts of the Alchemists* (1967) and A. Coudert's *Alchemy: The Philosophers' Stone* (1980) are both well illustrated.

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[DEDICATORY EPISTLE]

TO THE LADY, MOST
 DESERVING HER NAME,
 AND BLOOD:
 MARY,
 LADY WROTH

Madam,

In the age of sacrifices, the truth of religion was not
 in the greatness, and fat of the offerings, but in the
 devotion, and zeal of the sacrificers: else, what could
 a handful of gums have done in the sight of a 5
 hecatomb? Or how might I appear at this altar, except
 with those affections that no less love the light and
 witness, than they have the conscience of your virtue?
 If what I offer bear an acceptable odour, and hold the
 first strength, it is your value of it, which remembers 10
 where, when, and to whom it was kindled. Other-
 wise, as the times are, there comes rarely forth that
 thing so full of authority or example, but by assiduity
 and custom grows less, and loses. This, yet, safe in
 your judgement (which is a Sidney's) is forbidden to 15
 speak more; lest it talk, or look like one of the
 ambitious Faces of the time: who, the more they
 paint, are the less themselves.

Your Ladyship's true honourer,
 BEN JONSON 20

Mary, Lady Wroth: addressee of three poems by Jonson
 (*Epigrams*, 103, 105, and *Underwoods*, 28). Daughter of
 Robert Sidney, first Earl of Leicester, niece of Sir Philip
 Sidney, and herself a poetess. Her husband's name could also
 be spelled 'Worth', hence 'most deserving her name'.

2-5 from Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, I.vi.2.

8 *conscience*: knowledge.

13 *assiduity*: frequency.

[EPISTLE TO THE READER]

TO THE READER

If thou beest more, thou art an understander, and
 then I trust thee. If thou art one that tak'st up, and
 but a pretender, beware at what hands thou receiv'st
 thy commodity; for thou wert never more fair in the
 way to be cozened than in this age in poetry, 5
 especially in plays: wherein, now, the concupiscence
 of dances and antics so reigneth, as to run away from
 nature, and be afraid of her, is the only point of art
 that tickles the spectators. But how out of purpose
 and place do I name art, when the professors are 10
 grown so obstinate contemners of it, and presumers
 on their own naturals, as they are deriders of all
 diligence that way, and, by a simple mocking at the
 terms when they understand not the things, think to
 get off wittily with their ignorance? Nay, they are 15
 esteemed the more learned and sufficient for this by
 the many, through their excellent vice of judgement.
 For they commend writers as they do fencers, or
 wrestlers; who if they come in robustuously, and put
 for it with a great deal of violence, are received for 20
 the braver fellows: when many times their own
 rudeness is the cause of their disgrace, and a little
 touch of their adversary gives all that boisterous force
 the foil. I deny not, but that these men, who always
 seek to do more than enough, may sometime happen 25
 on something that is good and great; but very seldom:
 and when it comes it doth not recompense the rest of
 their ill. It sticks out perhaps, and is more eminent,
 because all is sordid and vile about it: as lights are
 more discerned in a thick darkness than a faint 30

Passages from the preface based on Quintilian (II.xi, xii) were repeated by Jonson in comments on the practitioners and audience of poetry in *Discoveries* (Herford and Simpson, VIII, pp. 583, 586–7).

- 1 *understander*: a common Jonsonian theme. Jonson addresses himself to the discerning reader or spectator, who can appreciate his 'art', and repudiates the vulgar, who lack informed judgement. This lofty attack on popular taste continues in the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair*.
- 7 *antics*: grotesques, such as would be seen on the popular stages, but not at indoor theatres like the Blackfriars.
- 10 *professors*: practitioners.
- 12 *naturals*: natural gifts; but a *natural* was also a fool.
- 17 *excellent vice*: supreme viciousness.

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shadow. I speak not this out of a hope to do good on
 any man against his will; for I know, if it were put to
 the question of theirs and mine, the worse would find
 more suffrages: because the most favour common
 errors. But I give thee this warning, that there is a 35
 great difference between those that (to gain the
 opinion of copy) utter all they can, however unfitly;
 and those that use election, and a mean. For it is only
 the disease of the unskilful, to think rude things
 greater than polished: or scattered more numerous 40
 than composed.

37 *copy*: copiousness.

40 *numerous*: abundant; but also harmonious, properly measured.