

English Literature for Schools

BEN JONSON
THE ALCHEMIST

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Ben Jonson, Edited by R. J. L. Kingsford
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¶ Except that the spelling and punctuation have been occasionally modernised and a few passages omitted, the text of William Gifford's edition of 1816 has been followed.

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INTRODUCTION

BEN JONSON was born in Westminster in 1573; and with a few short breaks he lived the whole of his life in the London which is so vividly reflected in *The Alchemist*. His father, a minister, died a month before he was born, and two years later his mother re-married. Her second husband, who was a bricklayer, may have had little sympathy with his step-son's scholarly leanings, but at any rate he deserves our gratitude for making good provision for his education by sending him to Westminster School. On leaving Westminster, Jonson himself tells us that he was put to a trade, which we may assume to have been that of a bricklayer, but this suited him ill and before long we find him soldiering in the Low Countries. We know that he was married not later than 1592 and that by 1597 he had begun his connection with the stage, as an actor under Henslowe's management. One of the most popular plays of the period was *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, and we can picture Jonson taking the very part of Jeronimo to which we shall find him referring in *The Alchemist*. In 1598 he produced his first important comedy, *Every Man in his Humour*, in which a part was played by no less a person than William Shakespeare. In the same year Jonson's career suffered a short set-back which might well have turned out more seriously. In a quarrel he killed another member of Henslowe's company, Gabriel Spenser, and was imprisoned for murder. His release was, fortunately, procured after a few months, but in the meantime, as a result of visits received from a priest, Jonson had become a Roman Catholic. After his release his plays follow one another in quick succession, the most notable being *Every Man out of his Humour* (1599) and

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his first tragedy, *Sejanus* (1603). The accession of James I, who was himself a man of letters, and a patron of literature accordingly, was a fortunate event for Jonson no less than for others of his profession; and in the early years of the reign he found plenty of employment in writing masques for the entertainment of the Court. In these years his success was at its height and by 1616 he had produced nearly all the plays upon which his reputation rests, including *Volpone, or the Fox* (1605), his two masterpieces, *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman* (1609) and *The Alchemist* (1610), and his second tragedy *Catiline* (1611). The remaining years of Jonson's life are of little moment. In 1616 he received a pension of 100 marks a year, a sum which seems to have fluctuated from time to time. In 1618 he took a holiday from the drama and spent a year and a half in Scotland, staying for part of the time with William Drummond of Hawthornden, who has left us a delightful legacy of *Conversations* with Ben Jonson. Much, also, of his leisure in London during this period was spent in conversation within the circle of literary men who gathered at the Mermaid Tavern. The accession of Charles I marks the beginning of the final period of his career, in which, forced to supplement his pension and his salary as city chronologer, he took to writing for the stage again; but he produced no more great comedies—and it is with this, the most important, branch of his genius that we are here concerned. He died in 1637.

Jonson's comedies are essentially a part of his own time; and of all his plays *The Alchemist* most reflects the Jacobean London in which he lived. Not only is it full of contemporary allusions, to the new Royal Exchange and the commerce to which Elizabeth's reign had given such an impetus, to the money-lenders and other swindlers with which London swarmed, to the new and fashionable pastime of smoking, and so forth; but its very plot hinges upon an actual event of the year in which the play was written and produced: the plague which visited London during the summer of 1610. Frightened by the plague,

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Lovewit quits the city and leaves his house in the charge of his servant Jeremy, who under the assumed name of Face enters into an 'indenture tripartite' with Subtle, a professional alchemist, and Dol Common, to practise alchemy and any other profitable form of swindling that may present itself. The lure of the promised gold draws to them a succession of dupes. Mammon, the knight, hopes to have all the metal in his house transmuted into gold and to rise to unparalleled heights of riches and luxury. The Puritans, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome, propose by hiring soldiers and bribing magistrates, to establish Puritanism firmly in England. Dapper, a lawyer's clerk, seeks a familiar spirit to advise him in his gambling. Druggier, a tobacconist, demands a magic sign to draw custom to his shop and directions for the placing of his shelves in the most fortunate position. Kastril is taught how to be a fashionable town 'blood'; and his sister, Widow Pliant, is told her fortune in marriage. Each in turn is robbed of his goods and his money; and the swindlers' success is complete, until the unexpected return of Face's master sees the discomfiture of all, with the exception of Face himself. Even from this skeleton of the play it can be seen how much the action is interwoven with everyday events of Jonson's time; he had, in fact, a plot which provided him with exceptional opportunities for satirising two social pests of the age: Puritanism and the profession of alchemy.

The theory of alchemy is difficult to describe in any but a vague way, for it was the outcome of vague thinking. The alchemists' theory that they could turn any metal into gold rested upon one fundamental belief: that every substance of nature has an essential principle or element out of which it has grown, as a chicken grows out of an egg, and that, further, there is an element common to all these essential principles—a universal essence. Thus they believed that, since there is a property common to all substances, firstly one substance could be turned into another and secondly an imperfect substance could be developed into a perfect one, if only by their art the

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fundamental essence could be fostered and increased.
 As Subtle himself is made to say:

‘Twere absurd
 To think that nature in the earth bred gold
 Perfect in the instant: something went before.
 There must be remote matter.’

To find this ‘remote matter’ in every substance and to distil the one perfect element common to all was the alchemists’ aim; and the elixir they sought they called ‘the philosopher’s stone.’ This once discovered, all nature would be at their command. The growth of the quintessence could be quickened by their art, the imperfect could be made perfect, the most worthless metal turned to gold, by the application of the philosopher’s stone. The general was however ignored for the particular; and the end of alchemy was soon taken to be, not the extraction of the quintessence of all things, but the making of gold and silver. The ‘remote matter’ they believed to be partly a liquid, partly a solid, substance, which, mixed together, formed stones and metals; the preponderance of the solid producing stones, the preponderance of the liquid producing quicksilver and sulphur, the parents of all metals. The philosopher’s stone itself was apparently conceived to consist of the elements of seven metals (each of them called by the name of a celestial body: gold being the sun, silver the moon, iron Mars and so forth) of which quicksilver, or mercury, was the most important, and of the elements of four spirits, sulphur being the most important of these. These metals and spirits, properly distilled and mixed, formed the ‘stone.’ Of these vague speculations no better description could be found than that which Jonson himself puts into the mouth of Subtle (see pp. 32–34); indeed, Jonson puts the case for alchemy as fairly and plausibly as could a professor of that art.

Popular belief in alchemy and the following of it as a profession have fluctuated considerably. In the Middle Ages it was generally believed in and the names of many scholars, including Paracelsus, can be counted among its

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adherents. In England in the reign of Edward III we find the craft of multiplying gold and silver recognised at the Mint and by the end of the fourteenth century it had become of sufficient public importance to be satirised by Chaucer in his *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and to be declared a felony by a statute of 1403. Little is heard of alchemy in the early part of the fifteenth century, but by 1450 it was at its zenith and Henry VI instituted commissions to enquire into it as a means of replenishing his treasury. The practice declined again in the following century, but in Queen Elizabeth's reign the country was alive with alchemists, the cause being no doubt supported by the fact that the Queen herself was a believer; and hand in hand with the alchemists went the astrologers, palmists and other dealers in magic. This was the state of affairs which Jonson found in 1610; and in drawing the characters of Subtle and Face there can be little doubt that he had in mind three well-known names of the period, John Dee and Simon Forman, to both of whom Subtle bears some resemblance, and Edward Kelley, the prototype of Face. Dee, who appears to have been a sincere believer in alchemy, was a mathematician and an astronomer of repute, who in his later years interested himself in alchemy and magic in general and associated himself with Kelley. Kelley, a clever charlatan, obtained a complete mastery over him and together they toured the Continent, holding *séances* with spirits and transmuting metals. In particular they spent much time with Albert Laski, a Polish nobleman, and Rudolph II, Emperor of Germany, who eventually detained Kelley in prison. To their partnership the alliance of Subtle and Face bears a resemblance, for both Kelley and Face frequently trick and outwit their partners. The career of Forman must have provided Jonson with even better material. He was the best-known quack of the time and, like Subtle, had an extensive practice in London not only in alchemy, but in medicine, necromancy, astrology and crystal-gazing.

Alchemy and its allied sciences form the basis of Jonson's plot. The Puritans, the other of the two social

pests which he satirises, he treats more incidentally but with even more contempt for their hypocrisy. The current objections to the Puritans and their jargon, probably somewhat exaggerated, will be found enumerated by Jonson in Act III, Scene 2 (pp. 51, 52). The quarrel between them and the stage was of long standing. The Puritans attacked the stage in general; the stage returned the attack and got the better of the argument. Contemporary drama abounded in references to the Puritans, until in 1642 the theatres were closed by Act of Parliament. To Jonson's scholarly mind the comic possibilities of an argument between the Puritan jargon and the jargon of alchemy offered an obvious appeal.

Jonson was the most scholarly of the Elizabethan dramatists. It was the scholar in him which made him put into Subtle's mouth something more than the usual jargon of a swindling alchemist and made him give him as erudite a case as a confirmed adherent of alchemy could have put forward. It was to the scholar in him that the pseudo-science of alchemy appealed as an object of ridicule. It was, too, his classical training which made him realise that Elizabethan drama obeyed no rules; and he, therefore, attempted to conform to the theory, first laid down by Aristotle, that drama should have 'unity' of action and, the natural deduction from Aristotle's theory, that the imagination and 'willing suspension of disbelief' required in playgoers should be assisted by the events depicted in the play happening in one place and occupying, so far as possible, no more time than that required for their performance on the stage. *The Alchemist*, which Coleridge classed with Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Fielding's *Tom Jones* as 'the three most perfect plots ever planned,' comes as near as possible to this ideal of 'unity.'

The observance of these 'unities' of time and place appealed to Jonson's realism; and he was essentially a realist, even to the extent of introducing into his play the very plague that was raging in London while he wrote. Jonson represents the comedy of social satire at

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its height. Though he made excursions into tragedy, masque and pastoral drama, his proper sphere was the satiric and comic presentation of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. In their realism his comedies differ from the romantic comedies of Shakespeare, for Jonson had none of Shakespeare's appreciation of beauty or romance. In his piercing scrutiny of human foibles and weaknesses he had no eye for subtlety of character; his men have not the complexity, nor his women the beauty, of character which Shakespeare's have; and his work, therefore, has not Shakespeare's universality. But in *The Alchemist* we see Jonson's qualities at their best. In the profession of alchemy he had a subject which appealed to his two sides: the scholar with a love of the abstruse, the satirist with an eye for the weaknesses of human nature.