

The Alchemist (Jonson) Summary

Lovewit has left for his hop-yards in London, and he has left Jeremy, his butler, in charge of his house in Blackfriars. Jeremy, whose name in the play is Face, lives in the house with Subtle, a supposed alchemist, and Dol Common, a prostitute. The three run a major con operation.

The play opens with an argument that continues throughout the play between Subtle and Face. It concerns which of them is the most essential to the business of the con, each claiming his own supremacy. Dol quells this argument and forces the conmen to shake hands. The bell rings, and Dapper, a legal clerk, enters, the first gull of the day. Face takes on the role of “Captain Face”, and Subtle plays the “Doctor.”

Dapper wants a spirit that will allow him to win at gambling. Subtle promises one and then tells him he is related to the Queen of the Fairies. Dispatched to get a clean shirt and wash himself, Dapper leaves, immediately replaced by Drugger, a young tobacconist who wants to know how he should arrange his shop. Subtle tells him, and Face gets him to return later with tobacco and a damask. Their argument looks set to resume when Dol returns to warn them that Sir Epicure Mammon is approaching.

Sir Epicure Mammon and his cynical sidekick, Sir Pertinax Surly, are next through the door. Mammon is terrifically excited because Subtle has promised to make him the Philosopher’s Stone, about which Mammon is already fantasizing. Face changes character into “Lungs” or “Ulen Spiegel,” the Doctor’s laboratory assistant, and the two conmen impress Mammon and irritate Surly with a whirl of scientific language. Face arranges for “Captain Face” to meet Surly in half an hour at the Temple Church, and a sudden entrance from Dol provokes Mammon, instantly besotted, into begging Face for a meeting with her.

Ananias, an Anabaptist, enters and is greeted with fury by Subtle. Ananias then returns with his pastor, Tribulation. The Anabaptists want the Philosopher’s Stone in order to make money in order to win more people to their religion. Subtle, adopting a slightly different persona, plays along. Kastrill is the next new gull, brought by Drugger, who has come to learn how to quarrel—and to case the joint to see if it is fit for his rich, widowed sister, Dame Pliant. Face immediately impresses young Kastrill, and he exits with Drugger to fetch his sister.

Dapper, in the meantime, is treated to a fairy rite in which Subtle and Face (accompanied by Dol on cithern) steal most of his possessions. When Mammon arrives at the door, they gag him and bundle him into the privy. Mammon and Dol (pretending to be a “great lady”) have a conversation which ends with them being bundled together into the garden or upstairs—Face is pretending that Subtle cannot know about Mammon’s attraction to Dol.

The widow is brought into the play, as is a Spanish Don who Face met when Surly did not turn up. This Spaniard is in fact Surly in disguise, and the two conmen flicker between arguing about who will marry the widow and mocking the Spaniard by speaking loudly in English of how they will “cozen” or deceive him. Because Dol is occupied with Mammon, the conmen agree to have the Spaniard marry the widow, and the widow is carried out by Surly.

In the meantime, Dol has gone into a fit of talking, being caught with a panicked Mammon by a furious “Father” Subtle. Because there has been lust in the house, a huge explosion happens offstage, which Face comes in to report has destroyed the furnace and all the alchemical apparatus. Mammon is quickly packed out the door, completely destroyed by the loss his entire investment.

Things start to spiral out of control, and the gulls turn up without warning. At one point, nearly all the gulls, including an unmasked Surly, are in the room, and Face only just manages to improvise his way out of it. Dol then reports that Lovewit has arrived, and suddenly Face has to make a final change into "Jeremy the Butler."

Lovewit is mobbed by the neighbors and the gulls at the door, and Face admits to Lovewit, when forced to do so by Dapper's voice emerging from the privy, that all is not as it seems—and has him marry the widow. After Dapper's quick dispatch, Face undercuts Dol and Subtle and, as the gulls return with officers and a search warrant, Dol and Subtle are forced to escape, penniless, over the back wall. The gulls storm the house, find nothing themselves, and are forced to leave empty-handed. Lovewit leaves with Kastrill and his new wife, Dame Pliant. Face is left alone on stage with a financial reward, delivering the epilogue.

The Alchemist (Jonson) Study Guide

The *Alchemist* is one of Ben Jonson's four great comedies. The earliest recorded performance of the play occurred in Oxford in 1610. It was also entered into the Stationers' Register in this year, though it might have been written and performed earlier than this date. Critics talk of the play as being written and performed in 1610. It was first printed in quarto in 1612, and it was included in the folio of Jonson's works in 1616.

A second folio edition of Jonson's works came out in 1640. This version included some emendations, many of which had to do with the tightening of regulations about uttering religious material on the stage. "God's will" (1612), for example, became "Death on me" (1640). Jonson's meticulous preparation of his own folio version was unusual, but it gives us greater confidence in the actual text of the play (no similar source history for Shakespeare, for instance, survives). Thus we have a stronger opportunity for insight into the playwright's sense of humor on the page and on the stage. For example, we infer that it was Jonson who had all the German and Dutch in the play ("Ulen Spiegel," for example) set in black-letter type.

To Jonson's audiences, *The Alchemist* would have been a modern play, set in Blackfriars in his own day—a town where there also was a famous theatre in which Shakespeare's late plays were performed.

The Folio edition lists as its principal comedians the actors of the King's men, many of whom were also the stars of Shakespeare's comedies. We know that Burbage, Heminges, Condell, and Armin, all lead actors in Shakespeare's company, were also in *The Alchemist*, and contextual evidence suggests that the Globe company had begun to use Blackfriars (an indoor theatre) as a winter alternative to the Globe (an outdoor theatre) in 1609.

The play is extensively informed by Jonson's wide-ranging learning and reading. It abounds with quotes from other plays and the Old Testament. Dol's "fit of talking" is itself an extensive quotation from *A Concoct of Scripture* by Hugh Broughton. There are also quotations and references to a myriad of other works, such as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, whose lead character Hieronimo is also winkingly referenced. (Hieronimo is a part, some evidence suggests, that Jonson himself might have played.) There is so much unusual or archaic language, especially in the alchemism scenes, that it could ruin one's enjoyment of the play by repeatedly returning to a glossary--part of the point is to be bowled over by the strange diction of the alchemist.

The play can seem fantastical to a modern audience, and it is often read as a cynical play that argues that even the most obvious illusions are believed by stupid people. Yet there is evidence to suggest that people in Jonson's time really were taken by cons such as that in the play. One man, Goodwin Wharton, was tricked at length into believing he was to be visited by the Fairy Queen some seventy years after the play was published and performed. See the excellent biography of Wharton, a real-life case of Alchemy-conmanship, in the citations for this ClassicNote.

As Jonson has risen to greater prominence, *The Alchemist* has shaken its reputation as being densely Elizabethan and unfunny, and critics have bolstered its rise into being known as one of the key texts of the Renaissance. Coleridge thought it, along with *Oedipus Rex* / *Oedipus the King* and *Tom Jones*, one of the three "most perfect plots ever planned." Note, though, that the play's plot is linear, with the stories of the seven gulls cleverly intersected to keep tension at the maximum.

Kenneth Tynan thought it a "good episodic play ... bead after bead, the episodes click together upon the connecting string, which is chicanery and chiselry." F. H. Mares led many modern commentators by beginning his essay with the observation that "All through the play there is a disparity between what people are and what they say they are." Such readings have culminated with Anne Barton's excellent chapter in *Ben Jonson: Dramatist*, which pronounces it "a play about transformation, as it affects not metals, but human beings."

Without doubt, *The Alchemist* has been restored to prominence since Victorian times. Often in the company of Jonson's other "great comedy," *Volpone*, it is analyzed with regard to Jonson's cynical and darkly comic views of London in 1610, legality (since justice in Jonson's plays is always an important question), belief, faith, and the sort of people who believe that they will one day secure infinite wealth.

The Alchemist (Jonson) Character List

Subtle

The "Alchemist" of the play's title. We never learn whether "Subtle" is a forename or a surname (or the only name). Meaning "crafty" or "clever" in Elizabethan English, it is an appropriate choice. Subtle is grumpy, constantly at odds with Face (he is often played as considerably older), and is very learned, being the one with alchemical expertise. He disguises himself as "the Doctor" to carry out his con.

Face

Face seems, to some extent, faceless; we get very little idea of a personality or an impetus behind his character. He is constantly switching roles. Some commentators think that his real name is "Jeremy," but this idea--particularly because it is not supported by Jonson's *dramatis personae*--could just be one more in a series of disguises Face undertakes. He plays "Ulen Spiegel" or "Lungs" for the Mammon-con, and more usually he is the wiseboy "Captain Face" for everyone else. He is essential in finding the gulls in the pubs of London and bringing them to the Blackfriars house.

Dol

Also "Dol Common," Dol is short for Dorothy, and her second name, "Common," is in itself a pun, meaning "everyone's"--because Dol is a prostitute. The play implies she is in casual sexual relationships with both Face and Subtle. Her role is not as important as Face's or Subtle's, yet her one transformation, into a "royal lady," is essential in maneuvering Mammon into the right place

at the right time. She escapes with Subtle "over the back wall" at the end--without a share of the goods.

Dapper

A legal clerk and a social climber who comes to the conmen in order to get a "gambling fly" (a spirit who will allow him to cheat and win at gambling). Dapper has met Face in a pub and has been tempted to the house. Extremely greedy and extremely gullible, Subtle tells him he is a relative of the Faery-Queen. Upon his return, he is locked in the privy for most of the play.

Abel ("Nab") Drugger

An honest, good soul, he is a young tobacconist who has just bought a new shop on the corner of a street. He wants the Doctor (having met Face in a pub) to advise him on (effectively) the feng shui of the building. He is tricked into handing over a lot of expensive tobacco and into bringing Kastrill and Dame Pliant (Drugger's shyly admitted crush) into the Blackfriars house. At the end of the play, he loses everything and is dispatched with a punch from Lovewit.

Lovewit

The master of the house and the employer of "Jeremy the Butler," his housekeeper (alias Face). Away for the majority of the play, Lovewit doesn't return until Act 5--unexpectedly, though Face lies and claims to have sent for him. At this point he punishes Face, but without uncovering the plot itself, or caring to. He marries Dame Pliant and leaves the stage halfway through the epilogue in order to smoke tobacco.

Sir Epicure Mammon

Epicure Mammon's name means a person who is devoted to sensory enjoyment and material wealth, and he is perhaps the play's biggest con. He is also the greediest gull of the lot. Constantly comparing himself and the alchemist's work with classical or antique riches, he is obsessed with food, sex, and the idea of getting his riches turned into gold by the Philosopher's Stone. His lust is the reason given by the conmen for the explosion that destroys the (non-existent) furnace and vanquishes his hopes of getting rich.

Sir Pertinax Surly

The sidekick of Epicure Mammon, he spends the first part of his time in the play bitterly mocking and criticizing Mammon but also calling into question the actions of the conmen. Surly then decides to try to catch them out, and--in his successful disguise as a Spaniard--he falls in love with Dame Pliant. In the end he is attacked by Kastrill and loses the girl.

Tribulation Wholesome, a Pastor of Amsterdam

The leader of the local group of Anabaptists (see "About Anabaptists" in this ClassicNote), Tribulation is rather more measured and logical than Ananias, but, as the representative of his group, he is hungry for money, membership, and power.

Ananias, a Deacon of Amsterdam

Ananias is an Anabaptist (see "About Anabaptists") and is greedy for power, land, and membership for his order. He is also incredibly angry and quick to condemn anything that may not be, as he sees it, Christian, and on numerous occasions he blurts out furiously that, for example, "Christ-tide" is the right, Christian name for Christmas. Ananias is also the name of a New Testament character who is stricken dead because of his greed.

Kastrill

An "Angry Boy," he wants to learn the skill of quarrelling: formal, rhetorical argument. He has come to Subtle to learn it. Clearly young and impressionable, he is very protective over his sister, Dame Pliant, and he goes to huge lengths to seem "one of the guys" in several of the group scenes. His "quarrelling" is rather unimpressive. Comically, he seems to know only a handful of (immature) insults, including "you lie" and "you are a pimp."

Dame Pliant

Often called "Widow" in the play, she is the recently-widowed sister of Kastrill. Dame Pliant's name means bendy, supple, or flexible; true to her name, she seems one of the stupidest characters in literature. When she does speak, very rarely, she has the same speech mannerisms (e.g., "suster") as her brother. Subtle steals several kisses from her (4.2) while she seems not to notice, and the two conmen fight over which of them will wed her (and inherit the considerable fortune she has inherited from her husband). In the end, it is Lovewit who gets the girl with no wits.

Neighbors

Several neighbors appear in the street upon Lovewit's return in 5.1, and they describe to Lovewit what they have seen happen while he has been away at his hop-yards. They have a tiny role to play within the play itself, though on a couple of occasions, Dol is seen shoos women away from the door. Their descriptions of "oyster-women" and "Sailor's wives" (5.1.3-4) give us the sense that the conmen have performed several more cons than the play showcases.