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## UNIT 3 THE STRUCTURE OF *THE ALCHEMIST*

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### Structure

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this Unit, the focus is on the structure of the play. An analysis of the play's structure is a preliminary step. This is followed by issues like performance of the play, stagecraft characterisation, and language, in the subsequent units. A variety of perspectives are then presented as aids to evaluating the play's meaning for the modern reader.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Modern science teaches us that substances differ in atomic structure. The so-called base metals can be transformed into gold through a highly expensive process of fission. Jonson's contemporaries, including the learned and the mighty did believe in alchemy. Queen Elizabeth was no exception. The religious aura around the person of *The Alchemist*, his speech interlarded with astrological jargon, and his airs of piety, humility, and simplicity combine to lend him a status above ordinary mortals. In order to enjoy the play, the reader and the spectator need to shed all doubts for the duration of the reading or of the performance.

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### 3.2 STRUCTURE

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The action of the play involves the three cheats – Subtle, Jeremy the Butler, and Dol Common who enter into a 'venture tripartite' to cozen eight gulls the clerk Dapper, Druggier the tobacconist, the knight Sir Epicure Mammon, the gamester Surly, the two Puritans, Tribulation and Ananias, the boy Kastril and his sister, the widow Dame Pliant. In the absence of the master of the house, Lovewit on account of the plague, the cheats carry on their trade briskly, luring potential gulls by appealing to their delusions.

The joy of the tricksters in cozening the credulous gulls seems to have an autobiographical basis. William Drummond of Hawthornden, Jonson's host in his Scottish tour recorded that Jonson had tricked a lady by disguising himself as an astrologer. Jonson's common sense attitude towards alchemy is evident in Epigram VI, 'To Alchemists'.

If all you boast of your great art be true  
Sure, willing poverty lives most in you.

Thematically, *The Alchemist* has been linked to Chaucer's *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and Erasmus' *Colloquies*, the major early satires on alchemy. It has also been suggested that Jonson may have drawn upon *The Puritan, or the Widow of Watling Street*, a play anonymously published just three years before the first performance of *The Alchemist*. In "the immediate model," W. David Kay argues, the elements that might have gone into the making of *The Alchemist* include: "two swindlers posing as a captain and a conjurer, an intrigue plot involving the marriage of a rich widow, and incidental satire on Puritan hypocrisy and casuistry."

The teeming life of London is evoked through numerous local allusions which, besides contributing to the play's realism, are vital instruments of satire. Jonson had used London as the locale for action in *Eastward Ho!* on which he collaborated with Chapman and Marston, and after turning to Venice for *Volpone*, confirmed his preference for London in *The Alchemist* (1610), *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), *The Devil is an Ass* (1666) and the revised folio version of *Every Man in His Humour* (1616). Jonson's many references to the vicinity of the Blackfriars theatre where the play was performed, and to the plague as the time of action made for direct appeal to the audience, to a pressure of the times. The prologue to *The Alchemist* clarifies this intent:

No clime breeds better matter, for your whore,  
Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known  
No country's mirth is better than our own,  
Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more,  
Whose manners, now called humours, feed the stage.

The pace of action does not slacken and is virtually continuous spanning the six hours from 9 O'clock in the morning. The setting is a room in Lovewit's house with a lane facing the front door. The play opens on an almost explosive quarrel by the prostitute pickpocket Dol Common. The gulling of the eight assorted victims concurrently contributes to suspense, for some of them are known to one another. Suspense is further heightened by the prospect of Lovewit's return too. When the imaginary laboratory goes up in smoke, the make-believe world is shattered. The rehabilitation of Face, after his master's marriage with the Dame Pliant is arranged, rounds off the action. As in other plays of the time, one character steps out of his role partially to comment on the ending: Lovewit's address to the audience,

Therefore, gentlemen  
And kind spectators, if I have out-stripped  
An old man's gravity, or strict canon ...  
Introduces a note of objectivity, demanding the audience's attention.  
Face's are the certain lines:  
Gentlemen,  
My part a little fell in this last scenes;  
Yet it was decorum

An absorption in oneself, the strategy required of the cozeners momentarily slips off to reveal his humanity.

An analysis of the plot suggests a patterning of effects in the action. The prologue focuses on corruption in London, the playwright's attempt to correct vices, and above all his care to present correction without embarrassing the tricksters and the gulls. Act-I opens with an interruption of chicanery in progress, occasioned by Face's condescension towards Subtle, and the intervention of the bullying Dol Common. In quick succession, Dapper the lawyer's clerk, Druggier the tobacconist and Sir Epicure Mammon the voluptuary arrive to renew their petitions for a familiar, advice for setting up a shop and the Philosopher's stone respectively. On one protest or other, each is sent away to return after fulfilling certain conditions. Thus, early in the play, the absolute power delusion has over the gulls is sketched. Subtle demonstrates his capacity to become whatever the gull's imagination requires.

Mammon's re-entry in Act-II, accompanied by the sceptical Surly, establishes the former's sensuality and amorality. A number of ironic turns are noticeable in Subtle's insistence on purity in the pursuit of the Stone, Mammon's causistry in asserting Subtle's purity and his own capacity to buy. Subtle's insistence on patience and purity on Mammon's part is a clear anticipation of the ending of the play. When Face presents Dol as the sister of a lord given to fits of madness, Mammon's carnality comes into the open. The Puritan Ananias' demand for the stone is brushed off by Subtle and Face. Their esoteric mumbo-jumbo leaves him crest-fallen. Grateful for the magical anagram, Drugger mentions Kastril would have his sister widow Dame Pliant marry only an aristocrat, and this brings in a new pair of gulls.

In Act-III Tribulation seeks to make amends for Ananias' rudeness, and gladly accepts Subtle's approval of the plan to make counterfeit coins. Puritan hypocrisy stands thoroughly exposed here for after all only Dutch dollars are involved. Surly in order to woo Dol enters disguised as a Spanish don. While Dapper is ready for a meeting with the Queen of Fairies (another role for Dol), he is blindfolded and his pocket picked. Further, he is gagged and locked in the privy to prevent discovery by mammon almost at the doorstep.

The action flows on into Act-IV when Face as Lungs helps Mammon to meet Dol as the sister of a lord. As Kastril and Dame Pliant arrive, being a quick change artist resumes his role as Face. Unable to bring in Dol, they think on their feet, and allow Dame Pliant to be alone with Surly in the garden. Kastril is instructed in polite quarrel-too. In the meanwhile, Mammon with his mind set on the philosopher's stone utters the fatal words, and brings on Dol's "fit of madness." Because of Mammon's violation of Subtle's command, the fulfilment of his dream is postponed, and the laboratory literally goes up in smoke. Still Mammon is undeceitful. Surly's attempts to win Dame by exposing Face and Subtle are shattered when he had to remove his own disguise in the process. Ananias arrives, but enraged by Surly's gaudy dress, drags him out. To crown it all, Lovewit is just then sighted.

In the concluding act, the goings on in Lovewit's house are made known to him by the neighbours. Jeremy is no longer able to manipulate the situation. While all the gulls rush back and threaten to complain to the police, Dapper calls out for release and meets the fairy of his heart briefly. As the officers knock at the door, Subtle and Dol run away. Lovewit marries Dame Pliant leaving the gulls helpless lookers on. Face alone appeals to the audience to understand his lot.

In spite of the multiplicity of intrigues, the plot has a unity as noted by several critics. In Coleridge's view, *The Alchemist*, *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Tom Jones* have the three 'most effect plots ever planned.' Coleridge perhaps had in mind the union of comic decorum with freedom of and richness of inventions. Evaluating the structure of the play, in terms of seven numbered intrigues which forms the core of the action, Uma Ellis-Fermor draws attention to the inner form of the play-characterized by a rhythmic design, and considers *The Alchemist* "to be without a companion in the drama with which I am acquainted." Paul Goodman offers an Aristotelian approach to the action. The impression of unity is attributed by T.S. Eliot to an "inspiration that radiates into plot and personages alike." Indeed, "as a masterpiece of design, within the compass of the classical unities," says Frederick S. Bocs, "*The Alchemist* takes its place at the head of Jonson's comedies." Here, we have, declares Felix E. Schelling, "the utmost cleverness in the construction, the whole fabric building climax on climax, witty and ingenious, and so plausibly presented that we forget its departures from the possibilities of life." And L.C. Knight avers: "*The Alchemist* is built as the double theme of lust and greed and the whole play is constructed so as to isolate and magnify the central theme. The extraordinary complications of the plot all centre on Subtle and Face, and all work in one end. The play is completely self-consistent; all the characters are actuated by variations of one motion, and no extraneous passions are allowed to enter ..... All the interests aroused in the readers

point in one direction." Thus *The Alchemist* has acquired the status of a classical play, and confirmed for better or worse the classicist image the playwright cultivated.

Moreover, the plot of *The Alchemist* is both original and realistic. It is based on the facts of contemporary London life; and Jonson's originality can be seen in using these facts. The spread of the epidemic plague in London and the evacuation of their houses by some of the landlords gave Jonson the idea of using these very circumstances as the background of a play exposing the frauds of the alchemists and the follies and the foibles of their victims.

In *The Alchemist*, the three classical unities have been observed to perfection:

**Unity of Action:** The opening quarrel of the cozeners has been acclaimed as masterly exposition, intimating the antagonism between Subtle and Face patched up momentarily by Dol and 'the venture tripartite'. The old rivalry surfaces again in moves and countermoves in regard to marrying the rich widow, Dame Plaint, and ends eventually in Face's assertion of his place in Lovewit's household and the hasty escape of Subtle and Dol. The core of the action, the intrigues the cozeners plan, is highly theatrical. The readiness with which Subtle, Face and Dol assume a role on the spur of the moment, their spontaneous realignment because of last minute change of plans (notably during Surly's attempts to expose them) and their skill in improvisation and histrionics are much in evidence throughout the play. Besides the aforementioned episodes, another would be the end of Act III, the bundling of Dapper off to the privy, the transformation of Captain Face into Lungs, and the surreptitious entry (at the start of Act IV) of the amorous Mammon on to an empty stage that a moment before was full of activity; another would be Mammon's guilty attempt to hide and Subtle's simulation of distressed piety after the explosion of the furnace later in the same act; yet another would be the discovery by Lovewit of Face, as he attempts to communicate to Subtle inside the house in Act V scene III. The examples could be multiplied. Discerning students would notice i) that not only are the various minor plots gathered into a single action, but the gathering itself is used to provide a great deal of theatrical comedy; and ii) that the stories of the various gulls interrupt each other and provide repeated opportunities for the oldest and most permanently effective kinds of comic action. This justifies J.B. Bamborough's comment: "Jonson really solved the problem of the Unity of Action by not having a plot at all, but rather a series of episodes unified by involving the same characters and happenings in the same place ... the real Unity of *The Alchemist* is more a unity of theme: it is a study in greed and self-deception. Structurally, Jonson's "brilliant use of alteration," in the opening scene Ailthum Sale observes, makes it "a demonstration of method ... like the prelude to an opera."

### Unities of Time and Space

Not only has *The Alchemist* the most complete unity of action of any of Jonson's plays, it also observes the unities of time and place with more exactness than any other play of Jonson. The time of the action is pretty well coterminous with the duration of the play in performance. There is only one place where time can be considered to pass during a break in the action, and that is between Act-II and III. According to Subtle's statement nearly an hour passes between the end of Act II Scene V, and the opening of Act III Scene ii, the two intervening lines contain just 150 lines. There is no anticipation at the end of Act II of the characters who will open the next act; whereas at the end of Act I we are told of the approach of Mammon and Suriy; the last words of Act III are addressed to Mammon, who is off-stage, waiting to enter; and Act IV ends with Lovewit seen out of the window, talking to the neighbours with whom we find him when Act V opens. This audience would lose its point if followed at once by an interval in which it could be forgotten. There are no lapses of time indicated between the scenes within the acts, and in most cases there is clear evidence of continuity. On the basis of the discussion we have had till now, it seems reasonably safe to suggest that *The Alchemist* was written to be performed without interruption except for one interval between the second and third

acts. With regard to *Unity of Place*, too, this play is the most circumscribed that Jonson wrote. The whole action is confined within or immediately outside Lovewit's house in Blackfriars.

### 3.3 GLOSSARY OF ALCHEMICAL TERMS

No edition for the general reader or playgoer can hope to cover the alchemical background thoroughly, and we have not tried to explain all the terms either in the glosses or in the longer explanatory notes. Jonson's alchemical terms fall into three main classes: (a) materials and substances, (b) alchemical equipment and apparatus, (c) alchemical processes. The following selective glossary may assist the reader and playgoer.

#### Materials, substances etc.

<i>Adrop</i>	:	the matters out of which mercury is extracted for the Philosopher's Stone; the Stone itself.
<i>aqua fortis</i>	:	impure vitriol
<i>aqua regis</i>	:	a mixture of acids which can dissolve gold.
<i>aqua vitae</i>	:	alcohol
<i>argaile</i>	:	unrefined tartar
<i>aurum potabile</i>	:	liquid, drinkable gold
<i>azoch</i>	:	mercury
<i>azot</i>	:	nitrogen
<i>calce</i>	:	powdered substance produced by combustion or 'calcination'
<i>chibrit</i>	:	mercury
<i>chrysosperm</i>	:	elixir
<i>cinoper</i>	:	sulphide of mercury
<i>kibrit</i>	:	sulphur
<i>lac virginis</i>	:	mercurial water
<i>lato</i>	:	a mixed metal which looks like brass
<i>maistrie</i>	:	the magisterium or Philosopher's Stone
<i>realga</i>	:	a mixture of arsenic and sulphur
<i>sericon</i>	:	black tincture
<i>zernich</i>	:	auripigment or gold paint

#### Alchemical equipment and apparatus

<i>Alembic</i>	:	the vessel at the top of the distilling apparatus which holds the distilled material
<i>aludel</i>	:	subliming pot
<i>athanor</i>	:	a furnace
<i>balneum</i>	:	bath; or process of heating a vessel
<i>bolt's head</i>	:	a long-necked vessel
<i>cross-let</i>	:	crucible
<i>cucurbite</i>	:	a distilling vessel
<i>gripes egg</i>	:	a vessel shaped like a vulture's egg
<i>lembek</i>	:	a still
<i>pelican</i>	:	an alembic

#### Process

<i>ceration</i>	:	softening hard substances
<i>chrysopcia</i>	:	the making of gold
<i>chymia</i>	:	alchemy
<i>cibation</i>	:	seventh stage in alchemy

<i>citronize</i>	:	to become yellow
<i>cohabitation</i>	:	redistillation
<i>digestion</i>	:	preparation of substances by gentle heat
<i>dulcify</i>	:	to purify
<i>inbibition</i>	:	a bathing process associated with the tenth stage
<i>inceration</i>	:	softening to the consistency of wax
<i>macerate</i>	:	to steep
<i>potate</i>	:	liquified
<i>projection</i>	:	the twelfth and last stage in alchemy
<i>putrefaction</i>	:	the fifth stage in alchemy whereby impurities were removed by the use of moist heat
<i>solution</i>	:	the second stage in alchemy
<i>spagyrica</i>	:	the spagiric art; Paracelsian chemistry
<i>sublimation</i>	:	conversion into vapour through the agency of heat, and reconversion into solid through the agency of cold

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### 3.4 CRITICAL EXTRACTS

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#### F.H. Mares (1983)

In both *Much Ado* and *The Alchemist* the action depends very largely on a series of deliberate deceptions. This is more the case in *Much Ado* than in perhaps any other comedy of Shakespeare's... The comparison between Beatrice and Dol is a little more elaborate. Dol, clearly, is a fully liberated woman... Jonson, more frequently than Shakespeare, withholds information from his audience... Jonson's comedy is mordant, reductive and conservative, while Shakespeare's is kindly, exploratory and radical.

In marked contrast to Beatrice, the docile Hero is willing to marry who ever she is told to marry. Dame Pliant will marry anyone wearing a Spanish suit. Both ladies are commodities to be acquired, as is clear from the way Face and Subtle discuss the Widow ... the comparison between Beatrice and Dol is a little more elaborate. Dol, clearly, is a fully liberated woman.

It is arranged for Subtle to overhear the raving of Dol as the mad lady; and it provokes his own brilliant charade of outraged virtue. When it is arranged for Beatrice and Benedick in their turns to overhear the account of how each loves the other, we have a little malicious pleasure in the gulling, but we are not moved to admiration by the skill of the performance .... Beatrice and Bendedick... Like the gulls in *The Alchemist*, their own desires help them to be deceived. The difference is in the nature of their desires and our moral valuation of them. One final point: the agents of resolution in both *Much Ado* and *The Alchemist* are the most simple and stupid people: Dogberry in *Much Ado* and Drugger in *The Alchemist*.

#### J.B. Steane

Alchemy, however, is essentially a vehicle in the play: the center of interest lies elsewhere, and Jonson is using the particular subject of alchemy as the means to another end. Other kinds of trickery might have sufficed, certainly other ways in which men could be exhibited as capable of infinite self-degradation when confronted with the prospect of easy money... *The Alchemist* too dramatizes this kind of 'possession'. Because they see Lovewit's house as a gold mine, the gulls who come visiting are obsessed with the single idea of gain, and this is now their 'humour'... So by his status in the plot, Lovewit's judgement should be the one which we as audience are called on to respect .... The rogues themselves ought, in an orthodox morality, to be merely ruthless and despicable. Instead, we find ourselves laughing

with them too often... There is every inducement for the audience to identify themselves with the rogues.

### Michael Jamieson

The density of the dialogue, the contemporaneity of the comedy to Jacobean audience, makes *The Alchemist* (like *Bartholmew Fair*) more difficult than *Volpone* for readers and playgoers today .... That he (Lovewit) dodges retribution is psychologically right, and reminds the audience that con-men, like the poor, are always with us.

### Arthur Sale

*The Alchemist* is not only about alchemy: it is itself an alchemical work. Its blood is visual and verbal – especially verbal – transmutation. Reality where all is illusion is the reality of the illusion... The first scene is not merely an exposition transformed from static narration to violent drama by a brilliant use of altercation. It is also a completed alchemical process, a demonstration of method, a telescoping of the whole like the prelude to an opera... Also, more strikingly, indeed marvolously, the coals and stills and alchemical ferments which give such excitement, rich colours, exotic associations, and piled – up solidarities in the play are not facts but words... The glittering captain and the canonical doctor use the language of the gutter to metamorphose each other into animals, beetles, vomit .... Among other great things Dol is here saying not only that the Heads of State share her equally but also that they are contained in her .... Subtle, of course, intends that for Mammon it shall remain a vision and a dream, and all the alchemy in the play has this ironic dimension. Subtle and Jonson both use alchemy for their own ends, but the interested motive of the former do not call into question, but enrich; those of the latter. Sexually, Mammon and Subtle embody two ancient and opposed alchemical concepts.

### W. David Kay

In the tradition of the 'estate morality', Jonson uses this representative sample to demonstrate how greed and credulity pervade society at all levels... Jonson's attitude toward alchemy is indicated in Epigram VI, "To Alchemists": 'If all you boast of your great art be true; / Sure, willing poverty lives most in you' ... The satire in *The Alchemist* thus cuts in many directions at once, mocking fantasies of self-gratification and power, as well as particular forms of credulity and ignorance.

### Una Ellis-Fermor

The play, *The Alchemist* is outwardly a comedy of character and event, so that the intrigue and interactions of the plot have one set of relations, analogous to the rhythmic design expressed in the painting by the lines. But the inner form of the play is one which is hardly representational at all of this interaction of event in everyday life, for the characters and consequently the moods they impress upon our minds, exist independently also as something more than the means. For the sake of this brevity I have given each intrigue a number in order of its appearance and used this number to refer to it in the text. Thus the plot set up against Dapper is the first, that against Druggier the second, Sir Epicure Mammon's the third, Surly's the fourth, Ananias' the fifth, Mistress Pliant's the sixth, Kastil's the seventh... As a piece of almost geometrical form, this play appears to be without a companion in the drama with which I am acquainted.

### Jonathan Haynes

Subtle and Dol and Face are clearly underworld figures, professional criminals, setting them off from Jonson's sharp gallants and from the inspired amateur *Volpone*, who glorifies more in the cunning purchase of his wealth than in the glad possession.

They have evolved directly out of the cony-catching pamphlet literature .... The "Argument" makes the "tripartite indenture" sound like shares in an acting company they here contract. It looks like a joint stock company, the newest form of capitalist organization .... Alchemy is the grand symbol for this volatile state of affairs. Alchemy makes a neat metaphor for nascent capitalism, and *The Alchemist* fits neatly in the development of Jonson's economic thought between *Volpone*, in which a real pile of ... gold draws "interest" in the old center of mercantilism, and the direct satiric exploration of capitalist "projection" in *The Devil is an Ass* .... The play toys with the idea that something can come of nothing, but substance is finally the issue; we move from the tripartite indenture to a marriage between the substantial property holders Lovewit and Dame Pliant .... The play opened with a crisis in the triple indenture, with Subtle claiming he had countenanced Face (pun intended) by sharing his knowledge, and Face claiming to have countenanced Subtle by providing the house, the material means of production.

### **Renu Juneja**

The "honest" Surly in *The Alchemist* fares badly. One sound way of assessing Jonson's attitude to a character is to see how the plot deals with him. The dispute over the worthiness of Surly as against the skullduggery and moral decline of Lovewit can be ended once for all by reminding ourselves that it is Lovewit who succeeds and not Surly. Jonson does not always punish the wrongdoers but nor does he allow them to triumph as unequivocally as Lovewit triumphs ....

### **S. Musgrove**

Jonson's prime service to Elizabethan comedy was to give it structure and coherence, firm plotting and clear characterization. The overshadowing genius of Shakespeare tends to hide its need of such reform... Jonson's characters, like Marlowe's, are heroically obsessional: needing to become themselves to an absolute degree, they expose the raging vacuum of the self... Each of the gulls seeks to be changed from himself, but only becomes more completely what he really is.

### **J.B. Bamborough (1967)**

The argument is also a first-rate piece of explication for the benefit of the audience, *The Alchemist* progresses largely by a series of quarrels... The out-facing of Surly in these scenes, in Act IV might be regarded as Face and Subtle's finest hour because it is all improvised, whereas the discomfiture of Mammon is something they have planned long before. Effectively, as the audience actually experiences the play, both scenes contribute to the feeling that *The Alchemist* is being made up by Face and Subtle as it goes along .... *The Alchemist*, and like all Jonson's comedy it demands to be played quickly and without pause .... *The Alchemist*, indeed, lends a good deal of colour to the charge that Jonson seems at times to approve more of his rogues than his fools... what motivates him in his attempts to expose the cheats is not love of truth, but, as he says, his objection to being gulled .... It almost begins to look as if in his portrayal of 'natural follies', as he calls them in the preface to *The Alchemist*, Jonson has begun to lose sight of his sterner moral purpose.

### **Alan C. Dessen**

Does analysis of the dramatic possibilities provided by such late moralities offer any insight into the techniques and structure employed by the master of Jacobean satirical comedy, Ben Jonson?... there have been few critical studies which have argued for a definite relationship between any of Jonson's major comedies and the morality tradition ... no allegorical personae intrude into the literal Jacobean scene ... Jonson has here supplied six characters who represent different social stations, different professions, and different age groups but who possess one common denominator, a susceptibility to the wiles of Subtle, Face, and Dol .... But so does the ending of *The*



*Alchemist*. Here, as in the morality play or the masque, Jonson has projected his final effect beyond the fictive world on stage into the lives that must be led by the audience after the performance... In general structure, *The Alchemist* has many interesting connections with the late morality. ... owing to our own culpability, there is only limited hope for improvement in the world outside the theater. *The Alchemist*, particularly in its last two acts, is the culmination of Jonson's moral comedy.

### Edward B. Partridge

This inflation and explosion of the plot is apparent in the way epithets are used throughout *The Alchemist*. In the first scene two motifs are developed side by side; ... one is the motif of abusive epithets which Subtle, Face, and Dol fling at each other. They call each other rogue, slave, cheater, cut-purse, bawd, and witch... The impostors are compared to mongrels, scarabs, vermin, curs .... The dog imagery recurs most often. Dol is a bitch, and Face and Subtle are mastiffs. In short, we are among the snarling animals that live on other beings or each other ... that ambiguous world between the animal and the human .... The imagery of *The Alchemist* is perfectly functional in several ways. First, it develops, as alchemy develops, beginning with base metals, such as a whore, a pander, and a quack, which it tries grandiloquently to transmute into finer beings - finally ending, as the dream of the philosopher's stone ends, in a return to the state of base metals... The imagery is functional in another way. The images work on the same principle that the play as a whole and usually each scene work. They are extravagant, inflated, and ludicrous .... The monstrous gap that opens between the tenor that we know to be mean and the vehicle that we assume to be great, and the demand that we find some similarities between them to bridge that gap, outrages our sense of decency and decorum... A third function of the imagery is to extend and develop the multiple references that alchemy had in actual life-especially the religious, medical, and commercial references .... In other words, the imagery suggests that, in *The Alchemist's* world, the acquisition of gold is a religion, a cure-all, a sexual experience, and a commercial enterprise.

### F. H. Mares (1967)

It is an over-simplification to say that Jonson's plot 'provided him with exceptional opportunities for satirising two social pests of the age: Puritanism and the profession of alchemy'. Alchemy is not so much the object of his satire as the means he uses to ridicule human greed and credulity .... The laboratory - It is the dream factory, the most potent instrument of delusion, ... This one fixed point in space obliged Jonson to have others: the two doors, right and left, one to the outside world, one to the 'back way' .... The exit to the laboratory is the focus of the play's physical action, its implied presence behind the scenes is as important... For this reason the localization of the scene is fixed and firmly maintained until after the symbolic explosion... The grandiose imagery proposed by Mammon's fantasy becomes meaningless by its excess, or lurches into grossness: ... All through the play there is a disparity between what people are and what they say they are. The servant, the quack, and the prostitute are the Captain, the Doctor, and the Lord's sister, or a priest and the Queen of Fairy. These high titles are counterpointed with abusive ones .... In *The Alchemist* we are not obliged to hold the play at a greater distance from us by having some characters come between us and it: we are invited to come closer, to identify ourselves with it. Lovewit and Face address the audience directly-Face even offers a comment on the dramaturgy: but they do so without coming out of the characters they have supported in the play .... This is not to make Jonson a seventeenth-century Pirandello, trapped in the insoluble problem of distinguishing illusion from reality, or a Genet, asserting at once man's inevitable need for illusion and the illusory nature of all conventional moral authorities... Jonson does not doubt for a moment that truth can be distinguished from illusion, that right and wrong are absolute and not relative terms.

**D.V.K. Raghavacharyulu**

Jonson's denouements have an air of the unexpected, in the sense that the dispensation of rewards and punishments is subtly calibrated through a principle of comic justice operating in favour of intelligence and common sense instead of innocence and piety. This administers a kind of comic trauma directed towards the quotidian poise of social order rather than heroic individuality .... Subtle is no alchemist and the theme of the play is not alchemy. Alchemy is a burnished mirror in which Faustian power is made to cast weird, heraldic images of Mephistophelean appetite .... Somewhere collaterally stands Sir Apicure Mammon whose auriferous extravagances of fantasy and arabesque serenades of sensuality are products of an excessive romanticism that goes entirely against the Jonsonian norm of classical balance and decorum .... He is Faustus and Falstaff doubled into one .... He is the grand anarch waiting to undo all civilized order; he is a gargantuan Anti-Christ who, in trying to set things right in his own fashion, would destroy the cosmic order itself.

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### 3.5 QUESTIONS

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1. Analyse the structure of *The Alchemist*.
2. Bring out the effect of developing the intrigues concurrently.
3. How does Jonson produce the illusion of reality with regard to alchemy?
4. Comment on the impact of the opening scene.
5. Does *The Alchemist* point to a lowering of the standard of judgement? Illustrate from the ending.

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### 3.6 ANNOTATION PASSAGES

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Annotate the following passages with reference to context:

- i) He bears  
The visible mark of the Beast in his forehead.<sup>o</sup>  
And for his stone, it is a work of darkness,  
And with philosophy blinds the eyes of man.
- ii) The children of perdition are oft-times  
Made instruments even of the greatest works.  
Besides, we should give somewhat to man's nature,  
The place he lives in, still about the fire,  
And fume of metals, that intoxicate  
The brain of man, and make him prone to passion.
- iii) Where have you greater atheists than your cooks?  
Or more profane or choleric than your glass-men?  
More antichristian than your bell-founders?<sup>o</sup>  
What makes the devil so devilish, I would ask you,  
Satan, our common enemy, but his being  
Perpetually about the fire, and boiling  
Brimstone and arsenic?
- iv) We must give, I say,  
Unto the motives, and the stirrers up<sup>o</sup>  
Of humours in the blood. It may be so,  
When as the work is done, the stone is made,  
The heat of his may turn into a zeal,

And stand up for the beauteous discipline  
Against the menstruous cloth and rag of Rome.°

- v) Have I discoursed so unto you; of our stone?  
And of the good that it shall bring your cause?  
Showed you (beside the main of hiring forces  
Abroad, drawing the Hollanders, your friends,  
From the Indies, to serve you, with all their fleet)°  
That even the med'cinal use shall make you a faction,  
And party in the realm?
- vi) As, put the case,  
That some great man in state, he have the gout,  
Why, you but send three drops of your elixir,  
You help him straight: there you have made a friend.  
Another has the palsy or the drosphy,  
He takes of your incombustible stuff,°  
He's young again: there you have made a friend.
- vii) A lady that is past the feat of body,°  
Though not of mind, and hath her face decayed  
Beyond all cure of paintings, you restore  
With the oil of talc: there you have made a friend,  
And all her friends. A lord that is a leper,  
A knight that has the bone-ache, or a squire  
That hath both these, you make 'em smooth and sound,  
With a bare fricace of your medicine: still  
You increase your friends.
- viii) No, nor your holy vizard to win widows  
To give you legacies; or make zealous wives  
To rob their husband for the common cause;  
Nor take the start of bonds, broke but one day,  
And say they were forfeited by providence.  
Nor shall you need o'er night to eat huge meals,  
To celebrate your next day's fast the better,  
The whilst the brethren and the sisters, humbled,  
Abate the stiffness of the flesh. Nor cast  
Before your hungry hearers scrupulous bones,°  
As whether a Christian may hawk or hunt,  
Or whether matrons of the holy assembly  
May lay their hair out, or wear doublets,°  
Or have the idol, Starch, about their linen.
- ix) Nor shall you need to libel 'gainst the prelates,  
And shorten so your ears against the hearing°  
Of the next wire-drawn grace. Nor of necessity  
Rail against plays to please the alderman  
Whose daily custard your devour. Nor lie  
With zealous rage, till you are hoarse. Not one  
Of these so singular arts. Nor call yourselves,  
By names of Tribulation, Persecution,  
Restraint, Long-Patience, and such like, affected  
By the whole family, or wood of you,  
Only for glory, and to catch the ear  
Of the disciple.
- x) When you have viewed and bought 'em,  
And ta'en the inventory of what they are,  
They're ready for projection; there's no more

To do: cast on the medicine, so much silver  
As there is tin there, so much gold as brass,  
I'll gi' it you in, by weight.

- xi) She must prepare perfumes, delicate linen,  
The both in chief, a banquet, and her wit  
For she must milk his epididymis
- xii) He will win you  
By unresistable luck, within this fortnight,  
Enough to buy a barony. They will set him  
Upmost, at the groom-porter's, all the Christmas!<sup>o</sup>  
And for the whole year through, at every place  
Where there is play, present him with the chair,  
The best attendance, the best drink, sometimes  
Two glasses of canary, and pay nothing;  
The purest linen, and the sharpest knife,  
The partridge next his trencher, and, somewhere,  
The dainty bed, in private, with the dainty.
- xiii) In the third square, the very street and sign  
Where the commodity dwells, and does but wait  
To be delivered, be it pepper, soap,  
Hops, or tobacco, oatmeal, woad, or cheeses.  
All which you may so handle to enjoy  
To your own use, and never stand obliged.
- xiv) And then for making matches for rich widows,  
Young gentlewomen, heirs, the fortunat's man!  
He's sent to, far and near, all over England,  
To have his counsel, and to know their fortunes.
- xv) Hoping that he hath vinegared his senses,  
As he was bid, the Fairy Queen dispenses,  
By me, this robe, the petticoat of Fortune;  
Which that he straight put on, she doth importune.
- xvi) And though to Fortune near be her petticoat,  
Yet nearer is her smock, the Queen doth note;  
And therefore, even of that a piece she hath sent,  
Which, being a child, to wrap him in was rent;  
And prays him for a scarf he now will wear it  
(With as much love, as then her Grace did tear it)  
About his eyes, to show he is fortunate.
- xvii) She now is set  
At dinner in her bed, and she has sent you  
From her own private trencher, a dead mouse  
And a piece of gingerbread, to be merry withal,  
And stay your stomach, lest you faint with fasting;  
Yet, if you could hold out till she saw you (she says)  
It would be better for you.
- xviii) Of gingerbread  
Make you it fit. He that hath pleased her Grace  
Thus far, shall not now crinkle for a little.