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"Turdy-facy-nasty-paty-lousy-fartical rogues": Mountebanks and Alchemists in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*

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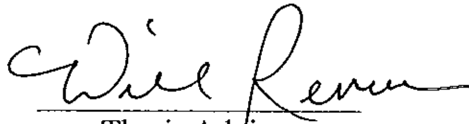

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"Turdy-facy-nasty-paty-lousy-fartical rogues": Mountebanks and Alchemists in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*

The quacksalver, also commonly known as the mountebank or empiric, was a well-known and omnipresent figure in early modern England. Setting up miniature stages complete with assistants and plenty of gimmicks, mountebanks peddled panaceas to enthralled crowds. As Roy Porter observes, "unlike the dialogue of regular medicine, the quack's patter is more like monologue or soliloquy, instilling confidence, exercising persuasion, disarming resistance, even —dare one say it?— out-arguing illness" (90). The task of the playwright, some might argue, is not much different. They must also put on a show, enrapture an audience with words, and cure psychic ills, if not physical ones. Their occupation is similarly fraught, as it can be hard to tell whether a mountebank or an author is peddling panaceas or poisons. Of course, both ultimately hope to make money out of their curative endeavors, and balancing the degree to which profit or cure takes precedence varies from poet to poet and quack to quack. In *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, Ben Jonson uses the quack doctor figures to interrogate his own role as a playwright, allowing their medicinal endeavor to represent his morally curative task.

Mountebanks and other doctors referred to as quacks were typically traveling doctors. They were widely considered to be "illiterate, ignorant, often foreign, commonly Jews," and therefore looked down upon (Porter 15). They were often called "empirics" because one of the main things differentiating a quack doctor from a "regular" was their lack of formal medical training, claiming travel and experience in the school of life taught them more than medical school ever would, as it allowed them to develop their own medicines based on experience. Isaac Swainson, in fact claimed that "in physic all changes…have been forced on the regulars by the

quacks" (Porter 21). Interestingly, there were no laws against quackery during this time period in England even though much effort was made to stamp it out on the continent. There were some organizations, however, such as the Barber-Surgeons Company and the College Physicians of London (whose governing body consisted entirely of Oxford and Cambridge graduates) who could refuse to issue licenses to empirics without proper educational training (Porter 35). Jonson may have related to feeling like an untrained outsider in his profession, as he was a bricklayer's son with very little formal education, competing with some writers who had graduated from prestigious colleges. Johann Oberndorf, author of a pamphlet warning sick people away from quacks, believed that any irregular medical practitioner must be "too ignorant either to Teach or Practise Physicke…too insolent, and arrogant to learne of the Maisters of that Facultie, or to be reduced into Order, so are they most dangerous and pernitious unto the Weale publike" (A3). Jonson was at times jailed, like when he was arrested for sedition after helping to write *Eastward Ho!*, and therefore considered "dangerous and pernitious" to the public, and he could very well have been viewed as arrogant or ignorant for not continuing in formal education. Jonson felt that his art, much like the medicine of a mountebank, was special, but he worried it had the potential to be poisonous or simply ineffective rather than curative.

Mountebanks, Spectacle, and Commodification in *Volpone*

Volpone's prologue, by way of framing the show, sets the play up as a kind of medicine for the audience. "All gall and copperas from his ink he draineth, / Only a little salt remaineth, / Wherewith he'll rub your cheeks, till, red with laughter / They shall look fresh a week after" (33-36). The very excretions of Jonson's pen serve as a quack nostrum to both cheer the audience internally and, to take the prologue literally, produce lasting cosmetic benefits. It is reminiscent of Bella Mirabella's account of mountebank sales pitches, in which "language and cure [are]

bound up and inseparable from each other" (158). Satirists of the time, including Jonson, tended to like the idea of themselves as healers of moral ills, so much so that Janette Dillon discusses how "the recurrent, self-congratulatory image of the satirist as healer not only ties the satirist… to the image of the body, but makes him responsible for forcing the body to release its corrupted fluids" (85). A satirist can only make their moral point through displaying the immoral nature of the object of their critique before the audience, and this could lead to questions of whether such exposure was truly a net good or rather almost a celebration of corruption. This could be likened to the extravagant displays of mountebanks, which sometimes involved performing cures on stage and therefore required exposing the audience to the presence of disease. If Jonson as curative satirist runs a similar risk of exposure to disease, he also leaves ambiguous just how real the morally medicinal work of the play will be. The audience may appear better only superficially, with a rosy complexion. A major criticism regular doctors levelled at quacks was that their cures treated only the symptoms and not the underlying cause of a patient's illness. Of course, a ruddy complexion can be a sign of general good health, and their cheeks will be "red with laughter" (35). By forcing the audiences' bodies to release laughter as a doctor would make a patient's body release corrupted fluids, Jonson claims to be creating health benefits, even if they may be only cosmetic.

The mountebank is in many ways an apt metaphorical representation of the playwright. Mountebanks' performances were highly energetic and theatrical. Porter states that the mountebank:

> appeared in eye-catching garb, something exotic or hinting at an official uniform. He was generally accompanied by a stooge – a harlequin, clown, or zany – whose job it was to draw a crowd and soften up bystanders with fooling, dumb-show, doggerel, conjuring

> and tumbling, and often to serve as an emotional surrogate for the audience. The act would be backed up by props such as cats, snakes, monkeys, skulls, stuffed alligators, alchemical apparatus and surgical instruments. Banners and bunting would create an atmosphere, music would drum up excitement. (Porter 91)

Volpone's servants, deformed but witty and entertaining, would have fit right into a mountebank's performance. When considered in conjunction with Mosca's assertion that Volpone has many children, all bastards, including "the dwarf, the fool, and the eunuch are all his; / He's the true father of his family," these fools could be considered metaphorically as imperfect, but entertaining, creations of Volpone the artist (1.5.47-48). Additionally, as Gordon Campbell notes,

> King James had an unhealthy predilection for people who had been unkindly treated by nature, and Jonson's figures of a dwarf, a eunuch, and a catamite ('hermaphrodite') must on one level have been designed to please the king's known fancies. On another level these figures associate the court of Volpone with the court of James, and thus hint at the greed and corruption of the latter. From time to time allegedly seditious elements in plays to which he had contributed had landed Jonson in prison, but on this occasion he escaped censure by virtue of the ambiguity of his criticism (xv)

In filling his stage with all the spectacle of a mountebank's performance, Jonson certainly succeeds in enthralling his audience with Volpone's court of fools. He may have executed his satire too subtly for it to work its healing effect though, if it avoided detection entirely. He chose to prioritize entertaining King James, one of the powerful audience members he so longed to be able to cure, over attempting to correct his folly.

Jonson refuses to let the audience dismiss the fools entirely as mere humorous figures though, as evidenced by Nano's monologue about the transmigration of Pythagoras' soul to Androgyno. Jonson greatly admired and knew much about many classical writers, as evidenced by his adherence to the neoclassical idea that the action of plays should occur within a twelve-hour day and man-made space and his self-identification with Horace, well known and obvious enough for Dekker to mock in *Satiromastix* (Riggs 89, 66). In fact, David Riggs states that Jonson "is accused of plagiarizing the classics; he is acquitted on the grounds that he has improved upon the originals" (37). Notably, one of the contemporary translations of Horace, published in 1566 was called *A Medicinable Morall*, connecting medicine to not only satire in general but to Jonson's particular brand of Horatian satire. The transmigration of Pythagoras' soul into the deformed fool Androgyno may be a self-aware acknowledgment of Jonson's own borrowing from classical tradition and placing classical ideas in the context of the theatre, a form of entertainment that could be considered vulgar and capable of tainting the writer's true goal through a need to entertain and provide spectacle for the common people. Volpone's creation of Androgyno could therefore be viewed either as a perversion of classical wisdom or a new way of presenting it and making it palatable for a contemporary audience with varying degrees of education. By putting classical wisdom in the mouths of fools, Jonson is attempting to elevate the popular theatre and make playgoing an experience that improves and instructs his audience, rather than merely entertains them.

Evidence that Volpone as mountebank represents an author or other creative figure comes in his introduction and denouncement of other mountebanks. Roy Porter points out that it is difficult to discern exactly where the line was drawn between quackery and regular medicine partially because no one self-identified as a quack (15). Everyone was quick to label others as

quacks to try to set their individual nostrum apart and establish it as legitimate. Volpone begins his sales pitch by calling other mountebanks "turdy-facy-nasty-paty-lousy-fartical rogues," and this rather extreme insult becomes even bolder when we consider that he is not critiquing the medical abilities of other quacks, but their storytelling abilities in accusing them of having "mouldy tales out of Boccaccio, like stale Tabarine, the fabulist" (2.1.58,50-51). This is not Scoto of Mantua criticizing other empirics, but Jonson boldly accusing other writers who he feels are not as effective as he is. Like an empiric, he wishes to set himself apart from the established order of regulars in the world of playwriting, who he feels are not creating works with the same curative potential that his have.

We learn very early on that Volpone himself, as the mountebank figure of the play and therefore a representation of the poet, "has no faith in physic" (1.4.18). Although of course Volpone has no need for medicine as he is only feigning illness, the accusations Mosca levels on his behalf at regular physicians are not far from the truth. In a time before carefully conducted clinical trials, "it was well nigh impossible to know for sure if a remedy was effective," so a doctor's advice may well indeed be "the greater danger, / and worse disease t' escape" than an illness itself (Wear 17, 1.4.22-23). It was this very fallibility of medicine that led many patients to seek treatment from less conventional doctors, and perhaps, in Jonson's mind, led an audience to seek moral correctives from dangerous sources in the form of other playwrights.

Aside from the potential inefficacy of medical cures in the early 17th century, the question of money is a complicated one to consider. Going to see a regular doctor or having a doctor come calling and getting daily medication from the apothecary was incredibly expensive, as Mosca references: "nor their fees / He cannot brook; he says they flay a man / before they kill him" (1.4.25-27). Porter discusses how the poor tended to turn to folk healers and herbal

medicine instead, and those in the middle of the economic spectrum often looked to quacks, whose nostrums they could afford even if there was a chance they wouldn't work. Poorer people would also sometimes spend a little more for quack remedies, and wealthy people would mix them in with their treatment from a more traditional doctor, so quacks dealt with people at all levels of the economic spectrum (41-52). Early modern playwrights such as Jonson similarly had to cater to an audience ranging from the poor groundlings to the nobility, although the quacks and actors themselves tended to come from lower class backgrounds.

The economic and class status of the playwright and quack must be considered along with that of their audience and patients. Being a playwright was a relatively new profession at the time, and Riggs discusses how in a society divided mainly along lines of gentlemen and common people, "the first generation of playwrights had no set place in this two-tiered hierarchy" (25). Work as a playwright, like work as an irregular doctor, attracted people from a variety of economic and educational backgrounds and could not be pigeonholed easily into a place in the social order. Jonson, always a social climber intent on gaining admiration from and access to the court, tended to view the theatre as a stepping stone to the more refined career of court masque writer, as some irregulars longed to become licensed practitioners. The ambiguity of social status of both playwrights and quacks could be an asset that allowed them to mix with and help heal people of all different classes, but in Jonson's mind it also prevented them from administering bespoke treatment to the wealthy and powerful, where he felt his talents were most needed.

Aside from the ambiguous social status that came along with the new profession of playwright, other complications arose from the new role theatre took on. Theatrical companies Jonson sometimes wrote for, like the Chamberlain's Men, which consisted of professional

performers and professional playwrights, replaced local festivals and cycle plays written and performed by amateurs whose primary job was something different. While there were of course people who made their living from performing plays, they were primarily itinerant performers much less polished, organized, and stable than the new theatrical companies in London, and perhaps more similar to the performing mountebanks roving the countryside. This move from amateur to professional theatre led to the commodification of an art form that was previously more freely exchanged. This concept is important because, as Michael D. Bristol writes:

> In sixteenth century usage, however, the term *commodity* had additional related usages of both expediency and convenience. The distinctive appeal of a commodity is this sense of a purely instrumental means for obtaining desired goods or amenities outside the complicated networks of reciprocal obligation that prevail in a traditional community. Dramatic performers in the early modern commercial playhouse offered the commodities of spectacle, narrative, and conviviality without the time-consuming burdens of skilled engagement or social commitment that would be required to obtain those same goods in a social world organized by the ethos of gift exchange. (247)

Commodification of theatre, then, allowed the mass audiences to view prepared spectacles without requiring their participation or engagement to the same degree that a gift exchange would. Jonson viewed this mass viewership as a cheapening of his work and lessening in effectiveness of his medicine, as each patient must individually accept treatment in order to be cured. The patronage system, in which poems or masques were tailored to specific nobles who were expected to reciprocate with money and appreciation, was still viewed as a type of gift exchange, and Jonson appreciated this one on one approach to treating his moral patients.

Another complication of examining mountebanks is that they were so often foreign. In *Sick Economies*, Jonathan Gil Harris argues that *Volpone* critiques "the exigencies and perils of foreign trade," which becomes particularly evident through Sir Politic Would-Be's plan to create a system to detect "whether a ship / Newly arrived from Syria, or from / Any suspected part of all the Levant / Be guilty of the plague" (Harris 108, 4.1.101-104). The mountebank, then, in introducing foreign cures may also introduce foreign diseases. Through putting these words in the fool Sir Pol's mouth, Ben Jonson is likely expressing skepticism at the idea of foreign goods and ideas being dangerous, or the possibility to detect which are and which are not. Either way, the mountebank as artist becomes more potentially dangerous but also more able to create something truly novel due to his foreignness.

Jonson's choice to set *Volpone* in Italy rather than England is also worth considering, particularly with respect to the mountebank scene. City comedies like this one almost invariably took place in London, so this deviation from the norm is a deliberate choice on Jonson's part. In *Medical Charlatanism in Early Modern Italy*, David Gentilcore discusses how Dionisio Scotto, the Scoto de Mantua Volpone poses as, was a real and well-known mountebank, and that "there is a handwritten version of his handbill for the oil. It is remarkable how the fictional Volpone's patter resembles that of Scotto's real-life handbill, from its general bombastic tone to the use of humanistic rhetoric" (24). This bit of verisimilitude Jonson could add by setting the play in Italy would have been appealing. Additionally, the word mountebank originated in Italy, as did charlatan. Gentilcore later discusses how Italian irregulars would willingly identify themselves as charlatans on official forms, something that simply wasn't done throughout the rest of Europe (64). This could have led Jonson to view Italy as the perfect setting for a play in which spectacle and money are valued above truth and goodness, as evidenced in the initial trial scene where

Bonario says that in the courts "multitude and clamour overcomes" his and Celia's true testimonies of their innocent consciences (4.2.19). When watching the many mountebanks, along with other peddlers and commedia dell'arte performers, in public squares in Italy, "travelers invariably enjoyed the show. What they might have condemned at home as coarse and inappropriate was, in Italy 'picturesque'" (Gentilcore 45). By setting the play in Italy rather than England, Jonson could allow his audience a similar level of detachment from a society full of corruption and with a justice system that vacillates quickly from totally ineffective to extremely harsh. Of course, this effort made to keep the play entertaining could also lessen the healing value of its satire if the audience could feel removed from it. By presenting the play with all the spectacle of the Italian mountebank, Jonson could be seen as leaning more toward the role of mountebank as entertainer than serious healer.

If we consider Volpone, the mountebank figure, a representation of the writer, his fixation on money becomes very complex. Mosca refers to Volpone's gold as a form of medicine for him multiple times, including after the deceptive courtroom scene in which Volpone continues to feign his illness in order to avoid charges of attempted rape. When he discusses the oils flowing from his skin, Mosca counters that "your gold / Is such another med'cine, it dries up / All those offensive savours!" (5.1.98-100). The legacy hunters come to Volpone hoping to enrich themselves by giving to him, perhaps as patrons may sponsor a writer and gain praise and respect in doing so, or as patients would pay a mountebank expecting a cure. Volpone uses his art of feigning ill only to gain money for himself, not to entertain or morally counsel others as Jonson believes art should be used, and this is why his punishment at the end of the play must be so severe.

Volpone arguably has more success in his scene as a mountebank than in any other scene in the play, for while he is not gaining riches he gains the admiration of the crowd and, in particular, of Celia, whom he wishes to woo. His success and likeability in this scene comes down to the fact that Volpone as Scoto of Mantua "despise[s] money" (2.1.172). In the end he is content to take for his oil "only, a pledge of your loves, to carry something from amongst you to show I am not contemned by you" (2.1.202-204). This is a performer asking of his audience only to know that they gained something from his art, without him needing to gain anything from them in return. Volpone is constantly scheming to enrich himself, and it is only in his disguise as a mountebank, a stand-in for the playwright, that he exchanges his insatiable desire for money for a desire to know his art is well loved. This could be seen as a rejection of the commodification both of medicine and of poetry.

On the other hand, J.A. Bryant Jr. makes the argument that Volpone's pursuit of Celia could also be likened to a writer's pursuit of a patron. Bryant states that in the mountebank scene Volpone approaches Celia "precisely like any successful creative artist approaches his patron; and were he a proper maker, the effect of his approach – a public demonstration of gratitude – should be as satisfying to him as it obviously is to her" (75). If we view the legacy hunters as patrons, they are obviously rather undesirable ones for Volpone, as he spends his creative energies towards them in pointing out their greatest flaws. Celia, on the other hand, is the patron whose support Volpone wants most. His mistake is his desire to possess her rather than to simply accept her support and write gratefully from afar. He chooses to use his creativity and art for his own pleasure rather than that of his wealthy patients, essentially choosing the profession of the playwright with more freedom over that of the masque writer with more influence and dignity, and this, to Jonson, is precisely where Volpone goes wrong. Douglas Duncan believes that

Jonson "offers a self-contained world in which none of the characters he creates expresses his view with complete authority" but argues that Volpone as Scoto di Mantua comes closest to truly expressing Jonson's views (154). It is in Volpone's failure, then, to live up to the artistic ideals of desiring only appreciation and recognition from the powerful that he truly begins to deviate from Jonson's view of the writer's duty.

There is danger in giving freely of one's art or medicine as well. Celia is immediately severely reprimanded by Corbaccio for throwing her handkerchief, which, Mirabella explains, was a symbol both public and private of a woman's femininity, so sharing it with another man could be construed as sharing something intimate with him. The Earl of Rochester posing as a mountebank named Alexander Bendo argued that "the politician (by his [the mountebank's] example no doubt) finding how people are taken with specious, miraculous impossibilities, plays the same game; protests, declares, promises I know not what things, which he's sure can ne'er be brought about." Some visions a poet may present of the way the world can work, just as some cures a mountebank may promise, could delude the audience into too intimate a connection with the author or quack or too fervent a desire for their vision of the world or their promised cure-all to be real. In the prefatory epistle to the play, Jonson states that it is "the office of a comic poet to imitate justice, and instruct to life" not to enact real justice or portray life as it truly is (Epistle 124). The world created by a writer is necessarily untrue, and Jonson here acknowledges the difficulty in encouraging the audience to both connect with and maintain a distance from the story he is telling.

Volpone's ultimate downfall, then, is wanting too much from his audience/patient in Celia. Although she expressed admiration for his performance as a mountebank, she wants no part of a more personal interaction, which would require her to be truly, and not merely

symbolically, intimate with him. She would rather he "flay my face / Or poison it with ointments for seducing / Your blood to this rebellion. Rub these hands / With what may cause an eating leprosy, / E'en to my bones and marrow" than have sex with him (3.7.252-256). Volpone becomes too caught up in his own art, believing the handkerchief, a mere representation of intimacy, constituted true intimate connection, and becomes violent in his pursuit of this intimacy. It is this mistake which ultimately takes him to trial and eventually leads to his and Mosca's punishment. The tale of Volpone is therefore a reminder that a poet, as a mountebank, must remain aware of the difference between their art and reality.

Jonson addresses such dangers specifically when he has Peregrine say of Sir Politic that "He that should write / But such a fellow, should be thought to feign / Extremely, if not maliciously" (2.1.57-59). Porter argues that mountebanks, in putting on performances as over the top as they frequently did, must lead the modern day scholar to wonder "are we witnessing theatricality astutely carried to the point of self-parody, the cultivation of pure make-believe, accepted as such on both sides?" (93). Here Jonson is engaging in self-parody, acknowledging that his characters are more caricatures than representations of real people. He admits to engaging in artifice, as mountebanks are wont to do. Throughout the play, Jonson is acknowledging the shortcomings and many potential ways he could fail as a writer, and addressing the additional complications that come when writing and performance are commodified, as when medicine is commodified. In critiquing medicine and the economics of disease ("Oh health! health! the blessing of the rich! the riches of the poor!" 2.2.81-82), Jonson also critiques the fact that writing must cater to and flourish within a consumer market and/or a market based on patronage, so authors may not always be totally free and honest with their

audience. Jonson himself wishes to avoid falling into such traps, but knows that deception is an inevitable and vital aspect of writing just as it is of quackery.

Medicine, Language, and the Theatre in *The Alchemist*

The Alchemist similarly critiques writing as a kind of quackery, but it focuses more specifically on the theatre. Unlike writing within the patronage system, and therefore writing in order to please specific nobles, which is the primary focus of monetary concerns about writing in *Volpone*, writing for the theatre was intended to reach an audience that came from all social classes and must appeal to a wider range of people. Jonson's awareness of this difference is evident in his choice to have almost all of his characters pertain to a lower class than the nobility of *Volpone.*

The reason this cast of lower class characters is possible is due to the setting of the play in the middle of a plague. The very first lines of the prologue, "the sickness hot, a master quit, for fear/his house in town" frame the play from the beginning in the context of illness and medicine, and the disruption of the social order that resulted from plagues, in which those with means tended to flee to the country (including members of the Royal College of Physicians) leaving the poor to fend for themselves and often die (Pelling 52). This disruption in the social order allowed criminal activity to flourish.

This setting in the plague is important not only to the plot, but to maintaining and expanding upon the neoclassical ideal of having all the play's action take place in one location over the course of twelve hours. Jonson takes this a step further by setting *The Alchemist* in Blackfriars, which, as it was performed in Blackfriars theatre, would naturally lead the audience to think about how close Lovewit's house would be to them were it real. According to Douglas Duncan, the play was likely meant "to be staged as soon as the plague receded sufficiently for

the theatres to open," meaning the reality of the overturned social order that occurred in plague times would also have been fresh on his audience's minds (193). This union of setting and performance space naturally links the two in the minds of the audience.

The midst of a plague was also quite a morbid setting for a comedy, bringing more serious overtones to Jonson's satire. Bryant reminds us that "no one who lived through the summer of 1610 could forget that the background for Jonson's play included dead carts, burial pits, and weekly bills" (121). This gruesome setting calls into question how lightly the audience is truly meant to take the events of the comedy. If we consider that the play often references and supplies metaphors for the theatre, it reminds us of Jonson's rather negative view of theatre as an art form, precisely because it catered to people who were of the same economic class as characters like Subtle and Dol Common in addition to the nobility for whom Jonson frequently wrote masques.

The prologue to *The Alchemist*, much like that to *Volpone*, clarifies this contentious relationship with Jonson's mixed class audience while simultaneously casting the play as a type of medicine. Jonson begins by framing this mixed class audience as "judging spectators," which seems to be expressing Jonson's ambivalent feelings toward them (3). It continues this slight aggression toward the audience and also confirms the unity of place by anchoring the play firmly in London, as "no clime breeds better matter for your whore,/Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more" (7-8). Despite this intemperate climate, Jonson remains hopeful that with his play's "wholesome remedies" he may "find no spirit so much diseased,/But will with such fair correctives be pleased," (15, 17-18). The skepticism that there are indeed such spirits in the audience clearly remains since he feels compelled to mention them, and he also draws attention

to the fact that in an ideal world "in their working, gain and profit meet" (16). Jonson hopes to use his medicinal writing for both the audience's moral gain and his financial profit.

Immediately after this prologue, the play opens with Subtle, the alchemist and the fraudulent doctor on display in this play, and Face, his assistant, hurling insults at each other. The audience is immediately presented with vulgarity and baseness. This is comedic, but it is also sudden and jarring, and it calls to mind the argument that satirists may be doing more harm than good in displaying vices on stage. This baseness is also connected to Subtle's alchemy, as he tells Face he has "sublimed thee, and exalted thee, and fixed thee" and still they end up in a petty quarrel about how they will go about cozening people, calling each other names like "the vomit of all prisons" (1.1.68, 1.1.104). Jonson assertively informs his audience that this will be a play in which characters will behave poorly (despite alchemical attempts to raise them from their lowly states), potentially shocking the spectators into immediately forgetting his wish for this very performance to treat their moral ills.

This opening scene of vulgarity begins to create a world in which no character is entirely virtuous. Unlike *Volpone*, in which Celia and Bonario are completely upright and moral and therefore rightfully, from a moral satirist's perspective, emerge triumphant, every character in *The Alchemist*, including the winners, are morally flawed. The system of final punishment and reward in *The Alchemist* is, as Alexander Legatt says, "a precise judgment which includes…a full acknowledgment of the value of wit" (77). "Precise judgment" is a theme throughout the play. The "judging spectators" address invites the audience to join Jonson in judging the characters (3). "Precise" was a term of derision used against the puritans, who are an important physical presence for both the characters and the audience because, as Peter Lake points out, Blackfriars was next to a notoriously puritan neighborhood (584). Dol Common draws attention

to their proximity in the first scene, referring to "sober, scurvy, precise neighbours,/That scarce have smiled twice sin' the king came in" (1.1.164-5). Jonson sets his comedy among stereotypically stern people who were notoriously opposed to the theatre, and he challenges himself to win over his "judging spectators," making them laugh along with him and agree with the final judgment he gives each of the characters (3). Examining each character based on both their positionality with respect to medicine and their use of language the seemingly arbitrary distribution of justice at the play's conclusion becomes clearly correct for Jonson.

The first of the gulls to appear is Dapper, a clerk who "consorts with the small poets of the time" and "can court/His mistress out of Ovid" and is thus a stand-in for those small poets, or perhaps aspiring small poets (1.2.52, 1.2.57-58). Subtle, whose gift lies less in medicine and more in reading people's desires, decides that what Dapper most wants is not merely a familiar to help him with dice play, a little extra help in the game of writing or the literary market perhaps, but a kinship with the Queen of Faery. Dapper's ultimate failing is in wanting to be chosen, gifted, without having to work in order to create, or literally, to win at gambling. It is "the Doctor's fear" that the Queen of Faery will "leave you all she has," so, given that Subtle is the main stand-in for the writer in this play, the Queen of Faery may be the inspiration to write. This desire to meet the Queen of Faery could also be read as a critique of the patronage system. The Queen is of course royalty and, in order to see her, Dapper is asked, aside from paying the Venture Tripartite of course, to go through a ridiculous, debasing ritual involving fasting, vinegar, humming, and buzzing (1.2.164-170). Jonson refused to completely sacrifice his autonomy as a poet even while praising his patrons, as in his epistle to the Earl of Dorset in which he argues "he can choose from whom to take gifts yet, in pursuing and in taking them, he confirms his dependence on and subjection to a social superior" (Scott 18). Playing the role of

powerless and humble recipient, then, enables Jonson to sue for the same benefits that symbolize his authority as a writer and, at the same time, his subordination to the authority of his patron (Scott 17-18). In the figure of Dapper, Jonson is critiquing unskilled writers who cannot succeed in literature without sacrificing their autonomy to a powerful patron.

Abel Drugger, the next gull to appear, is an aspiring businessman, tobacco seller, and apothecary. He is immediately found to be "free of the Grocers" and when "called to the scarlet" he will instead pay a fine because "his fortune looks for him another way" (1.3.5, 37, 41). He is attached to his money, carrying with him "a portague, I ha' kept this half-year" (1.3.87). His worst illness was "for being 'cessed eighteenpence/For the waterwork" (3.4.124-5). In the late sixteenth century "England was indeed experiencing a marked rise in consumption," and attitudes and markets were working to accommodate it (Baker, 2). In *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, R.H. Tawney states that in fifteenth-century Europe, medieval communitarian economic ethics held that:

> It is right for a man to seek such wealth as is necessary for livelihood in his station. To seek more is not enterprise, but avarice, and avarice is a deadly sin. Trade is legitimate; the different resources of different countries show that it was intended by Providence. But it is a dangerous business. A man must be sure that he carries it on for the public benefit and that the profits which he takes are no more than the wages of his labor. Private property is a necessary institution, at least in a fallen world; men work more and dispute less when goods are private than when they are common. But it is to be tolerated as a concession to human frailty, not applauded as desirable in itself; the ideal—if only man's nature could rise to it—is communism… (32-33)

The rapidly changing economic world was more difficult to conform to these beliefs. New views were certainly in existence by the early seventeenth century, and possibly held by Jonson himself, but the world of the play seems to maintain this medieval perspective on the economy. Dol Common ends Subtle and Face's early quarrel by reminding them, "and the work/Were not begun out of equality?/...all things common?/...cozen kindly/and heartily, and lovingly, as you should" (1.1.133-5, 137-8). This is of course tinged with irony as they are working together to cheat others, but Drugger's fault still lies in his pursuit of profit above concern for his community in refusing to join a guild or participate in public service. We also learn later that he sometimes dabbles in physic, as with Dame Pliant. If literature is a medicine, this means Drugger, like Dapper, is entering in it for the wrong reasons, in his case purely to turn a profit. Besides, he himself is "A miserable rogue, and lives with cheese,/And has the worms," and how is he to treat others well without even knowing the proper medicine to administer himself (2.6.81-2)? He does not wish to treat others well, or to sell them good tobacco for that matter, but to profit as much as possible from each endeavor.

Of the characters in the play, if Subtle is intended to represent the playwright, Face, as his assistant, must certainly represent an actor, or perhaps another side of the playwright himself. Some of the first evidence of this comes just after Drugger's introduction. Exasperated, he exclaims that his "intelligence/Costs me more money than my share oft comes to/in these rare works," calling to mind Jonson's constant complaints of the fast pace and minimal reward of writing for the theatre (1.3.107-9). Shortly thereafter, Subtle commands Face to "go you and shift," a playwright's stage direction to an actor to change costumes for a new role (1.4.9). That the people who are cozening those with vices are representative of the theatre is indicative of Jonson's belief that the theatre is meant to cure its audience of their vices. The fact that these

morally ill figures are cozened calls into question whether the theatre, as a deceptive experience, is inherently a duplicitous one meant to cheat.

Our next gull comes to seek the Philosopher's Stone, so now may be a good time to address alchemy. Interestingly, Subtle does genuinely know a lot of correct technical terminology, meaning Jonson himself was knowledgeable about alchemy and may have believed some alchemical processes were possible. Alchemists who were prosecuted for fraud were generally not prosecuted because people thought they were being deliberately swindled but because of their failure to deliver on their promises led the royals who hired them to believe they simply weren't skilled enough. As Tara E. Nummendal writes, "most practitioners, whether learned or not, considered themselves to be true alchemists (*Shell Games* 54). Subtle's knowledge of alchemical terms indicates that he may at some point have considered himself a true alchemist as well. Nummendal's point is that the kind of cynical and deliberate fraud that Subtle commits under the pretense of alchemy occurred seldom, if at all. Similarly, the kind of intentional grift in which authors intentionally created bad or morally corrosive material which Jonson so frequently frowns upon was likely not a frequent occurrence. As most alchemists believed themselves to be true alchemists, most writers believe themselves to be true writers.

Sir Epicure Mammon is the most ambitious of the gulls, and therefore the most outlandish, desiring the Philosopher's Stone. Before he enters, Subtle reflects on what he may do with the Stone were he to actually have it and decides he would begin by going around curing the sick, immediately connecting the Stone to medicine. In fact, one of the main functions of the stone was that its "elemental qualities are perfectly balanced and that is therefore incorruptible. This incorruptibility can then be transferred to the ailing bodies of humans" (Newman 394). Mammon himself says the stone "Can confer honour, love, respect, long life;/Give safety, valour,

yea, and victory," conflating improvements in physical condition with improvements in spiritual condition.

The Stone is discussed in a directly literary sense as well. Surly, Mammon's skeptical friend, says that after he gets the stone "the players shall sing your praises then,/Without their poets" (2.1.71-2). If playwrighting must be medicinal, a universal medicine would render playwrights unnecessary, and Surly is pointing out how difficult it is to imagine what that world would look like. Mammon says that for poets he will hire "the same that writ so subtly of the fart" just after "the purest and gravest of divines/That I can get for money," so Jonson is clearly, through Mammon, ironically criticizing those who write of "low" matters like farts even as he writes a play full of sex jokes, aside from the aforementioned first scene (2.2.63, 60-1). At the end of the Act II Scene ii Jonson gets to the heart of his frustration with his occupation. Surly points out that the Stone, the perfect medicine and therefore the perfect play, must be made by someone free of sin and Mammon responds "That makes it sir; he is so. But I buy it" (2.2.100). Jonson knows he is selling his plays to imperfect people who don't feel the need to perfect themselves, simply to buy his commodified words and twist their meaning for their own purposes rather than accepting their initial medicinal intent, just as Subtle's Stone would be were it real.

Subtle, as the playwright figure, is the actual creative force in the play. Much like Volpone as the mountebank, the author is again represented by a fraudulent doctor. Aside from his deceit, one way in which Subtle goes wrong in Jonson's eyes is the way he uses language. Subtle frequently throws out long lists of technical alchemical terms in order to confirm to the gulls that he is a true and knowledgeable alchemist. Surly refers to this use of language as the "art our writers/Used to obscure their art" (2.3.198-199). In response Subtle asks "Are not the

choicest fables of the poets/That were the fountains and first springs of wisdom,/wrapped in perplexed allegory?" (2.2.204-206). Jonson himself would be likely to agree with both of them. He hated writers who were overly verbose in an attempt to seem more knowledgeable than they were, as evidenced by his choice to have Crispinus vomit pretentious words in *Poetaster*, and in his *Discoveries*, in which he states, "Wheresoever manners, and fashions are corrupted; Language is. It imitates the publicke riot. The excesse of Feasts and apparell, are the notes of a sick State; and the wantonnesse of language, or a sick mind" (50). Jonson would disapprove of Subtle's use of specialized language unknown to his audience, making him a representation of an inferior or deceitful writer.

Language becomes an increasingly important issue as the gulls continue to arrive. Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome, the Anabaptists, arrive with "a new tune, a new gesture, but an old language" a reference to how ancient the Bible and its language, Hebrew, are, but how Jonson believes the puritans, who notably hated the theatre, have perverted it (2.4.27). Ananias declares that "All's heathen but the Hebrew," a linguistic sin to Jonson, a widely read autodidact and fan of the classics, some of which were written in the "heathen Greek" (2.5.17). The Anabaptists want to misuse medicine as well as language, as Subtle says of the stone:

> the med'cinal use shall make you a faction
>
> And party in the realm? As, put the case,
>
> That some great man in the state, he have the gout,
>
> Why, you but send him three drops of your elixir,
>
> You help him straight. There you have made a friend. (3.2.25-9)

He goes on to list several similar examples and Tribulation agrees, proving that the Anabaptists want to practice medicine only for their personal advancement. Peter Lake further elucidates this passage:

> The bonds of patronage, the exchanges of spiritual and temporal goods and services, that tied the godly to the ruling class have long been the feature of modern analyses of puritanism; here Jonson could be construed as making essentially the same point. However… Jonson is, as it were, carnalising things, seeking to reveal the links between puritan minister and lay patron as both self-serving and silly, involving as they did the exchange of real material goods and favours in return for entirely spurious spiritual services. (601)

Jonson is using the purely fantastical stone to show that all the puritans had to offer their patrons was pure fantasy as well. If we look at them, as would-be medical practitioners, as metaphors for writers, they are not dissimilar from Jonson himself. They express disdain for the popular theatre, but, Lake asserts, many of them attended anyway, much as Jonson continued to write for the theatre despite his ambivalence toward it (590). They also promised powerful patrons spiritual cures, just what Jonson hoped to provide with his writing. Perhaps part of why Jonson satirized the puritans so viciously was that he saw something he disliked in himself in them. In addition to their aforementioned linguistic and medicinal faults, the Anabaptists are hypocrites, willing to trade fairly for orphans goods only if their parents were "sincere professors" as well, and quick to reason that casting coins is lawful even though counterfeiting them is not (2.5.57). For these myriad faults, along with their condemnation of theatre making them entertaining targets in a play, the Anabaptists must receive their comeuppance.

The last of the gulls is Kastril, with his sister Dame Pliant. He is young and simply wants to learn to fight well. Subtle's first critique of him is that "this's no true grammar,/And as ill logic!" and offers to show him in his medical chamber "both the grammar and logic/And rhetoric of quarreling" (4.2.21-2, 64-5). The humor in this is that as a would-be roaring boy he mostly just wants to make a lot of noise and get into fights. As the youngest and simplest among them, his linguistic sin is the most basic, and due to a lack of knowledge rather than a deliberate choice. He is spared from punishment and in fact rewarded in the end for his willingness to learn. Jonson is open to having an audience he believes to be less morally intelligent than he, he just wants them to be willing and able to learn what he is trying to teach them.

Language is in fact so integral to this play that the advantage Surly has over the Venture Tripartite that allows him to unmask them is language. Face and Subtle believe they have the linguistic upper hand as they usually do, but in Surly they have met a match for their playwrighting skill. He takes on both the character and the language of a Spanish Don and they, believing themselves the superior intelligences there, gleefully tell him he will be cozened. They stop creating their own artistic work while Surly continues with his, and it becomes evident as Subtle gets sloppy with his language at the end of Act IV Scene iii when he first makes fun of the Spanish language, a language we all now know he doesn't speak ("enthratha," "chambratha," "bathada") then lapses into the childish rhyming of "soaked, and stroked, and tubbed, and rubbed,/And scrubbed, and fubbed" (4.3.95-8). This laziness with language shows a slip in the doctor's metaphorical playwrighting, allowing an equal, perhaps better, author to find him out.

Why then, is the most moral and insightful character (within the action of the play; we know he is a cozener normally) not rewarded? It is because his honesty has prevented him from doing morally medicinal work. Though he claims he saves Dame Pliant's honor from having

fraudulent doctor characters and those they trick to criticize other writers he believes to be inferior or less able to heal the audience's moral ills. He simultaneously engages in self-parody and questions whether his goal of using his theatre to cure his audiences is even possible. By viewing theatre as a kind of medicine, as he believes it should be, Ben Jonson can think and write metaphorically about his complex, nuanced, ambiguous feelings toward his own profession.

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