

The Alchemist

written by Ben Jonson

adapted and directed by Bonnie J. Monte

Audience Guide

researched and written by
the Education Department of
The Shakespeare Theatre
of New Jersey





In *This Guide*

- About Ben Jonson..... 2
- The Alchemist*: A Synopsis 3
- From the Director - Bonnie J. Monte..... 5
- The Alchemist*: A History of the Play..... 6
- Who's Who in *The Alchemist*? 7
- Glossary of Words and Terms 8
- Commentary and Criticism..... 10
- In This Production 11
- The Alchemist* Online..... 12
- Other Works by Ben Jonson..... 13
- Sources and Further Reading..... 14



About Ben: Jonson.

Benjamin Jonson was born on July 11, 1572, two months after his father's death. Two years later, his mother remarried a master bricklayer. Jonson, who was classically educated, well-read and cultured, began his schooling at St. Martin's Lane and was later afforded the opportunity to study at Westminster School by a family friend. During this time, he formed a bond with one of his masters, William Camden, who was an antiquarian, historian, topographer, and officer of arms. Camden's broad-ranging scholarship and guidance of Jonson lasted until Camden's death in 1623. Once Jonson left the Westminster School, he was expected to attend the University of Cambridge, but was obligated to fulfill an apprenticeship with his bricklayer stepfather. After his apprenticeship ended, Jonson traveled to the Netherlands and volunteered as a soldier with the English regiments.

Jonson married a woman named Ann Lewis in 1594 at the Church of St. Magnus-the-Martyr. The pair had a tumultuous marriage and they lived separate lives for five years. The couple had three children, only one of whom lived to adulthood. Their first child, Mary, died in 1593 at six months of age, and their second child, Benjamin, died of the bubonic plague in 1603 at the age of seven. Their only remaining son, also named Benjamin, died at the age of thirty-two.

Jonson's classical training was clear in his writing, which emphasized form and style over rhyme and meter, and mimicked classic literary qualities of simplicity, restraint, and precision. Jonson welcomed the newly crowned King James I and adapted his work to fit the new aesthetics and forms introduced during James' reign. With his flourishing career as a leading playwright of the age, Jonson reaped the benefits that came with patronage from the wealthy aristocrats and nobles. Under James' reign, Jonson wrote numerous masques specifically for the court and was given an annual pension. For these reasons, many scholars consider him to be the first Poet Laureate. For a brief period, Jonson worked as an actor, but it was readily apparent that he lacked the necessary skills and talent in this field, and that he was far more valued as a playwright.

Despite the great favor he garnered from the court, Jonson was notoriously in and out of trouble throughout his career. His work often came under sharp scrutiny and he had an infamous appetite for controversy—personal and political, artistic and intellectual. In 1597, while working with The Admiral's Men, a play he co-wrote with Thomas Nashe, *The Isle of Dogs*, caused such an upset that it was immediately suppressed. Arrest warrants were issued for both playwrights as well as members of the acting company, and Jonson was jailed while his counterpart escaped. Only a brief year later, Jonson was arrested again; this time for the death of the actor Gabriel Spenser, who he killed in a duel. Jonson pleaded guilty to manslaughter and gained leniency by reciting a brief Bible verse, forfeiting "goods and chattels" and being branded on his left thumb. In 1598, Jonson wrote and produced what his contemporaries considered to be his greatest success: *Every Man in His Humour*.

The height of Jonson's career came in the fifteen-year span between 1605 and 1620; a period notable for the abundance in which his plays were being written and produced to great acclaim. Unfortunately, like the works of countless Renaissance dramatists, many of Jonson's works do not survive.

After the death of King James I in 1625, Jonson's favor quickly diminished and he found himself an outsider in the court which had so eagerly supported him in the past. Toward the end of his life, Jonson was faced with numerous artistic and personal setbacks, many stemming from his damaged reputation. His health began to fail and he suffered several strokes throughout the 1620s. At the time of his death, Jonson was working on a new play called *The Sad Shepherd*; it was never completed. He died on August 6, 1637.

Jonson will forever be renowned as an exceptional playwright, poet, and literary critic; second only to William Shakespeare.





The Alchemist

A Synopsis

When an outbreak of the plague forces Master Lovewit to leave the city, his butler, known as Face to his friends in the streets, invites Subtle, a swindler posing as an alchemist, and Dol Common, a prostitute, to join him in using the house as a base of operations for their cons and scams. Dapper, a gullible lawyer's clerk given to gambling, is the first victim to call, by previous arrangement with Face. Dapper wants to learn from Doctor Subtle how to win at all games of chance. In the hands of the two rascals, Dapper is relieved of all his ready cash, in return for the promise of a "familiar," a tiny spirit embodied in a fly, which will bring Dapper luck in gambling and betting. In order to gull Dapper further, Subtle tells him to return later to confer with the Queen of the Fairies, who he claims is Dapper's aunt and who may bestow riches on him.

Abel Drugger, an ambitious young druggist and tobacconist who has also been led on by Face, is the next victim to enter the house. To his delight, he learns from Subtle, who speaks fluently in pharmaceutical and astrological jargon, that he will have a rich future.

Next arrives Sir Epicure Mammon, a wealthy knight, with his skeptical friend Pertinax Surly. Having been promised the Philosopher's Stone by Subtle, Mammon has wild visions of transforming all of his possessions into gold. During the interview, Dol appears dressed as a rich lady. Mammon catches sight of her and is fascinated. Face tells Mammon that Dol is an aristocratic lady who, being mad, is under the care of Doctor Subtle. Mammon asks Face to arrange a way for him to meet the mysterious woman. Before he leaves the house, Mammon promises to send Subtle certain of his household objects of base metal for the purpose of having them transmuted into gold.

The parade of victims continues. Ananias of the Amsterdam community of exiled Anabaptists comes to negotiate for the Philosopher's Stone on behalf of the church elders. Subtle, with Face posing as his assistant, showers Ananias with extravagant alchemical jargon. Ananias declares that the brethren are impatient

with the slowness of the experiment. Subtle, feigning professional indignation, frightens Ananias with a threat to shut the project down.

Drugger reappears only to be duped further. Subtle and Face are delighted when he tells them that a wealthy young widow has taken up lodging near him, and that her brother, recently come into an inheritance, has journeyed to London to learn how to quarrel in rakish fashion. The two knaves plot eagerly to get brother and sister into their clutches.

Ananias returns with his pastor, Tribulation Wholesome. Prepared to go to any ends to procure the Philosopher's Stone, Ananias and Tribulation contract to purchase Mammon's household articles, which, Subtle pretends are orphan's goods and needed for the experiment; Subtle claims the proceeds of the sale will go toward the care of orphans.

In the meantime, Face meets in the streets what he thinks is a Spanish don—Surly in clever disguise. Face lures the Don with promises of Subtle's famous healing "baths" and brothel services. Dapper returns to meet the Queen of the Fairies. At the same time, Drugger brings to the house Master Kastril, The angry young man who wants to learn to quarrel. Kastril is completely taken in by Subtle, who promising to make him a perfect London gallant, arranges to have him instructed by Face, who poses as a rakish captain. Kastril is so pleased with his new acquaintances that he leaves to fetch his sister to the house.

Dol, Subtle, and Face relieve Dapper of all of his money in a absurd ritual in which Dapper is to see and talk to the Queen of the Fairies. During the shameless proceedings, Mammon knocks. Dapper, who was blindfolded, is gagged and hastily put into a water closet at the rear of the house. Mammon enters and begins to woo Dol, who he believes to be a distracted noblewoman. Face, in order to have the front part of the house clear for further swindles, shunts the amorous pair to another part of the house.

Young Kastril returns with his widowed sister, Dame Pliant; both are deeply impressed by Subtle's manner and rhetoric. When the Spanish don arrives, Subtle escorts Kastril and Dame Pliant to yet another part of the house. Both Subtle and Face are determined to wed the rich Dame Pliant. However, Face must introduce the Spaniard to Dame Pliant making him think she is Subtle's famous



prostitute, because Dol is already occupied with Mammon. Dame Pliant is, of course, clueless; she thinks they are matching her up with a wealthy Spaniard for marriage. Despite her irrational objections to Spaniards in general, she consents to go off to a room with the don to be wooed.

In the next scene, we see, Dol pretending to be in a fit of madness. Subtle, discovering the distraught Mammon with her, declares that Mammon's moral laxity will surely delay completion of the Philosopher's Stone. Following a loud explosion, Face reports that the laboratory has been destroyed. Mammon despondently leaves the house, and Doctor Subtle collapses in feigned distress.

Surly reveals his true identity to Dame Pliant and warns the young widow against the swindling villains. When he reveals himself to the scoundrels and confronts them, Face, in desperation, tells Kastril that Surly is an impostor who is trying to steal Dame Pliant away. Druggier enters and, being Face's friend, insists that he knows Surly to be a scoundrel. Unable to cope with the onslaught, Surly departs, pursued by Kastril. Subtle places Dame Pliant in Dol's care, and he and Face continue to plot, only to be thrown once more into chaos when Master Lovewit, the owner of the house, unexpectedly returns. Face, quickly reverting to his normal role as Jeremy the butler, goes to the door in an attempt to detain his master long enough to permit Subtle and Dol to escape.

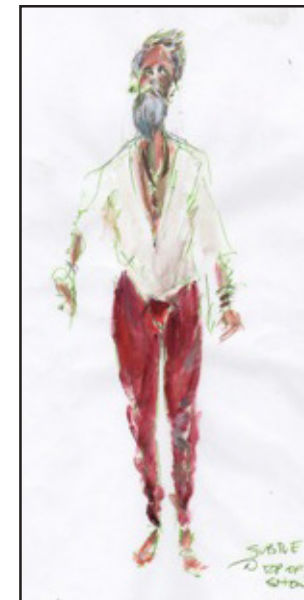


Lovewit, having heard from his neighbors that strange things have been going on in the house for weeks, further suspects that something is amiss when Mammon and Surly return to expose Subtle and Face. Kastril, Ananias, and Tribulation confirm their account. Dapper, having managed to get rid of his gag, cries out from within the house. Unable to contradict the great evidence

against him, Face confesses part of the truth to his master and promises to provide him with a wealthy young widow as his wife, if Lovewit will have mercy on him.

In the house, meanwhile, Subtle concludes the gulling of Dapper and sends the young clerk on his way, filled with the belief that he will win at all games of chance. Subtle and Dol then try to abscond with the threesome's loot, but Face, back in Lovewit's good graces, thwarts them in their attempt. They are forced to escape empty-handed by the back gate.

Lovewit wins the hand of Dame Pliant and, in his good humor, forgives his crafty butler. When those who have been swindled demand retribution, they get none. Surly, the one honest man, is also thwarted, but he vows future revenge and determines to bring Face to justice.



(from Left to Right)
Costume Designs
for Face, Subtle, and
Dol Common as the
Rich Lady by Nikki
Delhomme.



From the Director:

Bonnie J. Monte

It is a very exciting and humbling thing to discover something precious that one has previously been blind to or ignored. Such is my excitement over Mr. Jonson's *The Alchemist*. I fully and shamefully admit to sustaining a kind of juvenile disdain for the play over a 40-year span, based on nothing but my avoidance of it for so long. It was one of many plays I was assigned to read in college, and I remember perusing the first few pages and tossing it aside in frustration. I found it daunting to decipher, and lacking in any aspect compelling enough for me to complete the assignment -- and so I didn't. Luckily, it wasn't the subject of any subsequent essay test! I recall trying to read it again several times over the years, as occasionally it would be mentioned as a great classic that I should consider for production, both here at The Shakespeare Theatre and at other companies where I have worked. Each and every time, I would get about three or four pages in and then shove it back in the bookshelf, annoyed by its obstinate resistance to entering my brain with ease. I also admit to the fact that given my tentative and extremely limited exposure to the play -- literally a sporadic re-reading of the first three pages over four decades -- I had completely misconstrued what the play was about, assuming that it was about an alchemist. This did not seem terribly stupid at the time; the play's title seemed to indicate the likelihood of that being the case. So, it is with much chagrin and full disclosure that I confess to being wrong about everything in regard to *The Alchemist*.

For some reason (I sometimes think there is a mysterious divining rod hovering about me that leads me to certain plays at the exact right time), I picked the script up again this past winter with the thought, "well, I'll give it one more try." Inexplicably, I got past page three. Not only did I keep reading, but somehow it suddenly seemed so clear, and to my delight, hysterically funny. I found myself laughing out loud as I read it; at one point, so much so that I became quite alarmed. **It is a rare play that can make one laugh audibly and quite uncontrollably in the solitude of a reading room.** This is not to say that I don't recognize the comedy in comedies when I read them, yet most don't make me laugh raucously out loud until they are brought to life by actors. I became convinced that *The Alchemist* was possibly the funniest play I had ever encountered. I also saw, with dismay and clarity, why it is so rarely performed. It's a massive understatement to say that it's a tough nut to crack, as my own prolonged reticence so clearly demonstrates.

After much thought and re-reading, I decided on the bold (and I'm sure controversial) decision to "translate" and adapt it, in the hope of alleviating the problems that it

presents for a modern audience. This is indeed a provocative act because technically the play is written in modern English. The text is overflowing with archaic language, obtuse references, topical jokes, and technical jargon from 450 years ago; not to mention grammatical construction that feels almost foreign, numerous settings, a barrage of minor characters and, in its original form, is probably well over four hours long.

Each and every adaptation that I create presents a very different set of challenges and goals. **The goal here was not to "dumb down" Ben Jonson's work at all, but rather to create a more up-to-date language conduit through which the play could flow and emerge with deserved brilliance for the modern ear.** Language, sentence and thought structure, slang, and so much else have changed over the centuries since the play was penned, that even though it is written in our tongue, it strains that assertion. Add Ben Jonson's particular writing style, far more convoluted to us than Shakespeare's, and you have a very difficult piece of theatre. I'm sure that the language issues in combination with the play's epic production demands have prevented many a company or director from attempting it.

What has not changed over 450 years is human nature. Each and every thing that Jonson so magnificently and astutely observes about humanity, and then satirizes with equal brilliance, remains stunningly, appallingly, hysterically true and relevant. I could go on and on about the complexity and dazzling genius of the play, but I do not have the room to do so here. Let me simply say, that it is no mistake that Jonson is often touted as Shakespeare's only equal from that time or since. They lived at the same time, in the same place, and practiced the same occupation, but they could not be more different as writers. I read a wonderful remark that said that Shakespeare's genius was so unique that it has never been imitated or equaled since, that it will stand alone forever; **but that Jonson's genius was in creating a new form that was adopted and imitated, and influenced dramatic literature for generations after.**

I have made well over 1,000 changes to Jonson's original text -- some as minute as shifting the placement of a comma, others as arrogant as re-writing entire lines. I have made hundreds of cuts and word changes, and deleted various minor characters and locations. What I have attempted is to create an adaptation that so honors Jonson's language, style, and intent that, unless you are very familiar with the original, you will not notice the changes. This has all been done because I want this piece to be brought to the glorious life and attention it deserves as one of the world's greatest comedies. As a now fervent admirer of the play, I have assigned myself the role of modern tour guide to bring Jonson to the audiences of the 21st century. I am sure I will offend or even outrage the purists, but **the world and language change, even though humans do not, and so, in the spirit of the transformational nature of alchemy, I have endeavored to convert old gold into new gold.**



The Alchemist

A History of the Play

The Alchemist has a production history as colorful as the characters that inhabit its story. Due to the closing of many of the playhouses during an outbreak of the plague, the earliest documented performance of *The Alchemist* was not in London, but rather in Oxford in September 1610. Jonson's meticulous record keeping shows that Richard Burbage, John Heminges, Henry Condell, and other members of the King's Men performed in the original production, but his records do not specify which roles each actor played. *The Alchemist* opened to mixed reviews, being widely applauded by the court and receiving occasionally harsh comments from the general public. Despite its lukewarm debut, however, over the next two decades it was performed numerous times in the court and went on to become one of the most popular plays of the seventeenth century.

The play continued to be performed throughout the following decades even after the death of Ben Jonson, and it was later performed in Dublin. This revival featured a new prologue written by James Shirley to honor the recently deceased Jonson. The Irish audiences took to it less favorably than the English, finding the play too pointedly satirical or not broad enough in its comedy for their tastes.

There is an eighteen year gap of time (1642-1660) when the church suppressed theatre in which there are no recorded performances of *The Alchemist*. In 1662, Francis Kirkman published a collection of drolls, short comical sketches, entitled *The Wits; or Sport Upon Sport*. It contained a piece entitled *The Empiric* that featured the characters of Face, Subtle, Druggier, Ananias and was adapted from the first two acts of Jonson's play. When playhouses were opened again in the 1660s, *The Alchemist* was one of the first plays performed, this time with a new addition: women. With changing attitudes towards theatre, women were permitted on stage for the first time in England. In the newly mounted production, women took on the roles of Dol Common and Dame Pliant. Not only were there changes in the casting practices, but also in the performance spaces themselves. The smaller, more intimate venues and the use of perspective stage painting created a new aesthetic for *The Alchemist*, which utilized a crisp

interaction between the audience and the actors.

As theatrical tastes changed, Jonson's play faded from the stage. It did not regain popularity until the late 1730s when it was repeatedly performed for the court over the next two decades. In 1744, Corbyn Morris (a popular clown of the time) took on the role of Abel Druggier. This marked a shift in the approach to *The Alchemist*. For years to come, the play was used as a star vehicle rather than the ensemble comedy. The change was propelled by both the charisma of actors in the role and by changing tastes in comedy. There were also numerous spin-offs using the beloved characters from the play. Throughout the rest of the century and into the early 1800s, *The Alchemist* and its variations dominated not only the English stage but also surrounding regions as well.



In the mid 1800s, Jonson's work took a backseat to his more popular contemporary, William Shakespeare. In 1845, however, plans had begun for a star-filled production (including Charles Dickens as Mammon) at the St. James' Theatre. Though this production did not reach the stage, it did renew interest in the lost Jonson comedy, which found new life in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The quick wit, fast pace and often elaborate period costumes made it an audience favorite in England and in the United States. There was even a 1938 musical adaptation, which was adapted for the silver screen in 1941. The Marx Brothers' *Room Service* is a sharp example of a popular reworking of Jonson's story and structure into a new form.

Over the course of its stage history, the quick-paced comedy and mad characters of Jonson's *The Alchemist* have inspired playwrights and theatre artists in their own adaptations of the work. Nonetheless, as the best productions of Jonson's script have shown, *The Alchemist* continues to represent one of the most exhilarating, challenging and entertaining evenings of theatre in the dramatic canon.



Who's Who in *The Alchemist*

THE GULLERS:

FACE: One of the principal con men of the play; as the butler to Master Lovewit, he provides access to the home which the scoundrels use to con their unsuspecting victims, and assumes various disguises.

SUBTLE: The second of the principal con artists in the play, he primarily presents himself as "Doctor Subtle," an alchemist, in order to swindle the citizens of London of their property and wealth. [In the time of Ben Jonson, "subtle" meant "crafty" or "clever."]

DOL COMMON: A prostitute and colleague of Face and Subtle. [Dol is short for Dorothy, and "Common" is a pun on her occupation, meaning that she belongs to everyone.]

THE GULLED:

DAPPER: A lawyer's clerk and a gambler; eager for quick wealth and a gullible social climber, who comes to Face and Subtle in hopes of obtaining a spirit to allow him to succeed at the gambling table.

ABEL DRUGGER: A lower-class merchant who has just procured a shop; an honest and good (though not bright) man, he comes to the Doctor for help with various aspects of his new tobacco shop.

SIR EPICURE MAMMON: A wealthy knight with a mammoth appetite for luxuries and an epic imagination to match his sensual appetites, he seeks the Philosopher's Stone in the hope of transforming his possessions into gold. [His name means "someone who is devoted to the satiation of the senses and material wealth."]

PERTINAX SURLY: A friend to Epicure Mammon who is very suspicious of the integrity of Doctor Subtle and his companions; he later disguises himself as a Spanish don to snare them in their own trap. He proposes to Dame Pliant in order to better his own financial state and to save her from being married off to one of the con men.

ANANIAS: An exiled Anabaptist deacon now living in Amsterdam who is eager to strengthen his religious order; a fanatic zealot who is quick to condemn those who he does not see appropriate in his narrow brand of Christianity. [Ananias is named after the figure in the New Testament who was struck dead due to his greed.]

TRIBULATION WHOLESOME: A pastor of Amsterdam, and a leader of the Anabaptist order; hungry for money for his devoted flock of followers.

KASTRIL: An angry and insecure young rustic who seeks the aid of Subtle and Face to become skilled in quarreling. Very tyrannical when it comes to his sister, he is an ineffective quarreler in all ways.

DAME PLIANT: A widow, and Kastril's sister; she becomes the lust interest of several characters in the play. [Her name means "supple and flexible."]

MASTER LOVEWIT: The master of the house and Face's employer, who loves wit and bawdy humor.

Costume renderings
for Master Lovewit and
Dame Pliant by Nikki
Delhomme.





Glossary

of Words and Phrases

ALCHEMICAL/SCIENTIFIC TERMS:

Ablution: the process of washing something clean

Adrop: philosopher's stone, or substance from which it is obtained

Alembics: the part of a still in which distilled matter is collected

Amalgama: a mixture of different elements

Aqua Regis: "king's water"; a highly corrosive mixture of acids that is strong enough to dissolve gold

Aqueity: the essential quality of water; watery

Athamor: a chemical furnace

Azoch: the alchemical name for mercury; the essential first principle of all metals

Balneo Vaporoso: in a boiling bath

Bolt's head: a test tube like glass for distillation

Calcine: to heat an inorganic material to a high temperature in order to drive off volatile matter or effect change within the material

Calcination: to reduce matter with a strong heat

Ceration: to reduce to the consistency of wax

Chibrit: sulfur

Chiromancy: the art of telling a person's characters and fortunes by studying their hands

Chrysopoia: in the terms of alchemy, the transmutation of base matter into gold

Cinoper: an obsolete spelling of "cinnabar," a bright red mineral; mercury sulfide

Citronise: to bring to the color of citron; a stage in producing the Philosopher's Stone

Cohobation: an old chemistry term; repeated distillation

Cucurbite: A vessel, originally gourd-shaped, used in distillation and other chemical (or alchemical) processes; a cupping glass

Dulcify: To wash the soluble salts out of a substance, neutralizing the acidity of the substance

Eber: to manifest

Embrion: in alchemy: when a substance, hidden or in a combined state within another substance, can be isolated in its pure form

Epididimis: in human anatomy, it is a duct in the male reproductive organs

Familiar: a tiny spirit or imp

Fixation: the process of rendering fixed or immovable

In kemia: analysis by chemical preparations

Junctura annularis: the joint of the ring finger

Lapis philosophicus: another name for the Philosopher's Stone

Lato: created by mixing earth and copper while heated

Lembec: a part of a still in which the distilled matter is collected; the head

Linea Fortunae: old name for a line in the skin of the palm, used in palmistry

Lungs: a name given to the stoker of an alchemical furnace

Macerate: to soften by steeping in a liquid

Magisterium: a teaching authority, especially that of the Roman Catholic Church. In alchemy, it is a substance that is capable of changing the nature of a substance

Malleation: the test or process of hammering

Marchesite: an archaic name for iron pyrites, synonymous with ore

Martyrizations: a process of testing or refining by physical force or by fire

Metoposcopy: study of physiognomy; the art of judging character or telling a person's fortune from the forehead or face

Monte Veneris: in anatomy, the fatty cushion of flesh in human females situated over the junction of the pubic bones; the mons pubis of the human female

Mortification: death to part of the body. In alchemy, a means by which the form of a metal is altered by dissolution in acid

Necromany: the assumed practice of talking with the deceased in order to tell the future

Oleosity: the quality or consistency of being oily

Pamphysic: concerning all nature; Jonson is the only writer known to use this term in literature

Panarchic: all glorious and all powerful; Jonson is the only writer known to use this term in literature

Philosopher's vinegar: the distillation of maydew (the morning dew from the first of May) and the loadstone (a naturally magnetized metal) combined

The Philosopher's Stone:

a mythical stone or substance thought by alchemists to be capable of transmuting base metals into gold.

Also referred to as the Sorcerer's Stone, this fictional object appears in numerous stories (including the HARRY POTTER novels) as the ultimate tool for magicians and alchemists to shape the world around them.



Phlegma: watery distilled liquor; also an old chemistry term for water

Putrefaction: the state of being putrid; the process of rotting

Rivo Frontis: “the front vein,” an important feature in telling fortunes

Sangus agni: blood of the lamb in Christianity, relating to the idea of Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God. In alchemy, it is what many alchemists believe to be the last stage of perfecting the Elixir of Life

Sapor pontic: a quality perceived by the sense of sour or tart taste

Sapor Stiptic: having the power of a harsh or acidic taste that can cause the bowels or stomach to constrict

Spagyrica: derived from spagyric: The science of alchemy or chemistry, or an alchemist. Often used in the search for the Philosopher’s Stone

Sublime: causing matter to pass into a state of vapor

Sulphureity: the principle of being sulphureous. Jonson is the only writer to use this term in literature

Suscitability: the power of being roused or made alive

Terra damnata: the residuum remaining after the distillation or sublimation of any substance; alchemist’s term for earth

Terreity: the essential quality of earth; earthiness

Tutie: a crude oxide of zinc found when melting brass. Once used medicinally, it is now commonly used in polishing powder

Vivification: the process of converting into living tissue

Zernich: a name given by alchemists to arsenic

GENERAL TERMS

Adalantado: the lord deputy or governor of a Spanish province

Angel: a gold coin worth 10 shillings, stamped with the figure of the archangel Michael

Ars Sacra: term used to describe medieval Christian art in metal, ivory, textiles and other high-value materials

Butcher: an epithet given to the Puritan faction

Buttery: A place for storing liquor

Caul: the inner fetal membrane of higher vertebrates especially when covering the head at birth

Chiaus: Turkish envoy; implied a cheat or swindler

Clim o’ Cloughs: wordy heroes of romance

Clout: a piece of cloth, leather, metal, etc., that is used to mend something

Cockatrice: a fictional creature (both reptile and bird) believed to be able to kill with a mere glance—used as a term of reproach for a woman

Coitum: coitus, sexual relations; Jonson is the only writer known to use this derivative of the term

Compeer: an equal or peer

Costermonger: a person who sells goods, especially fruits and vegetables, from a handcart in the street

Cozen: to cheat

Crosslet: a cruet or little pot, such as one used by goldsmiths to melt gold in

Donzel: a young gentleman that is not yet knighted

Doxy: prostitute or mistress

Duello: the practice or the art of dueling

Ephemerides: a diary or journal of daily occurrences often to do with the constellations and natural forces

Firk: a smart sudden blow or stroke, as with a whip; a flick, flip; a cut or thrust (with a sword)

Fucus: a paint, or cosmetic for the complexion

Fumo: a hot vapor containing fine particles of carbon produced by combustion

Homo frugi: a man described as honest, pious, temperate, and frugal

Mammon: material wealth or possessions, especially as having a debasing influence

Pelf: stolen goods, especially when gained in a dishonorable manner

Portague: a gold Portuguese coin

Scarab: a type of beetle

Stella: Latin for “star”

Talmud: Hebrew law

Threaves: droves

Three-pound-thrum-livery: a cheap, inexpensive servant

Trencher-rascal: a poor person or beggar that eats from a trencher

Trine: a group of three, a triad

Troth: “true oath”; truth; a pledge of faith or loyalty

Velvet head: referring to the velvet skullcap often worn by philosophers

Verdugo: (Span.), hangman, executioner



Commentary & Criticism

ON THE PLAY:

“When the cat’s away, the mice certainly do play in Ben Jonson’s 1610 comedy – a play that, like theatre itself, revels in lies and illusions.”

Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*

“(The *Alchemist* is) a play about transformation, as it affects not metals, but human beings.”

Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson: Dramatis*

“In a curious way, what the fools of the play fail to do, the rogues almost achieve. That is, Face and Subtle and Dol do manage to convert the crudest raw materials imaginable —human greed, lust, vanity and stupidity— into gold by working the fools for all they are worth.”

Alvin B. Kernan, Introduction to *Ben Jonson: The Alchemist*

“The steadfast and imperturbable skill of hand which has woven so many threads of incident, so many shades of character, so many changes of intrigue, into so perfect and superb a pattern of incomparable art as dazzles and delights the reader of *The Alchemist* is unquestionably unique — above comparison with any later or earlier example of kindred genius in the whole range of comedy, f not in the whole world of fiction.”

Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Study of Ben Jonson*

“Upon my word, I think the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *The Alchemist*, and *Tom Jones*, the three most perfect plots ever planned.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*

ON BEN JONSON & HIS LEGACY:

“The man who was more famous at his death than the author of *Hamlet* may have suffered from being the first celebrity playwright. We know far more about him than we do about Shakespeare. We know about his several imprisonments (he killed an actor and was prosecuted for ‘lewd and mutinous behavior’); we know... about his many strictures on other writers: he declared that Beaumont was too pleased with himself and Philip Sidney’s face was ‘spoiled with pimples.’ But we seldom see his plays.”

Susannah Clapp, *The Observer*

“In [Jonson’s] works you find little to retrench or alter. Wit, language, and humor, all in some measure, we had before him; but something of art was wanting in drama till he came.”

John Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*

“Ben Jonson is original; he is, indeed, the only one of the great dramatists of that day who was not either directly produced, or very greatly modified, by Shakespeare. In truth, he differs from our great master in everything—in form and in substance—and betrays not tokens of proximity. He is not original in the same way the Shakespeare is original; but after a fashion of his own, Ben Jonson is most truly original.”

Samuel Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Literary Criticism*

“Jonson was the more celebrated and multifariously accomplished figure during his time and in the years immediately after his death in 1637, but his plays are produced relatively rarely today — only *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* are widely known — and his poetry is read more rarely still.”

Charles Isherwood, *The New York Times*

“In a career lasting 40 years, this ‘huge overgrown play-maker’ – as he calls himself in *The Staple of News* – cast a correspondingly giant shadow over the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline literary landscapes. More than any of his contemporaries – more than Marlowe, Shakespeare, Spenser, or Donne, to name just the crème de la crème – this swaggering, learned, truculent and (let it never be forgotten) uproariously funny writer was a celebrity in his own time. And a generation after his death in 1637, when John Dryden looked back over the development of English theatre, it was Jonson rather than Shakespeare whom he singled out as ‘the greatest man of the last age’ – though he added a telling rider to this, saying: ‘I admire him, but I love Shakespeare.’”

Charles Nichol, *The Guardian*



In *This Production*



(from Left to Right)
Costume Designs
for Subtle as the
Alchemist, Dapper,
and Face as Lung by
Nikki Delhomme.



Set Design by Jonathan Wentz





Other Works by Ben Jonson

PLAYS

A Tale of a Tub, 1596
The Isle of Dogs, 1597
The Case is Altered, 1597–98
Every Man in His Humour, 1598;
Every Man out of His Humour, 1599
Cynthia's Revels, 1600
The Poetaster, 1601
Sejanus His Fall, 1603
Eastward Ho, 1605, a collaboration with John Marston and George Chapman
Volpone, 1605–06
Epicœne, or The Silent Woman, 1609
The Alchemist, 1610
Catiline His Conspiracy, 1611
Bartholomew Fair, 1614
The Devil is an Ass, 1616
The Staple of News, 1626
The New Inn, or The Light Heart, 1629
The Magnetic Lady, or Humors Reconciled, 1632
The Sad Shepherd, 1637, unfinished
Mortimer His Fall, 1641, fragmented

MASQUES

The Coronation Triumph, or The King's Entertainment, 1604
A Private Entertainment of the King and Queen on May-Day, 1604

The Entertainment of the Queen and Prince Henry at Althorp, 1603
The Masque of Blackness, 1605
Hymenaei, 1606
The Entertainment of the Kings of Great Britain and Denmark (The Hours), 1606
The Masque of Beauty, 1608
The Masque of Queens, 1609
The Hue and Cry After Cupid, or The Masque at Lord Haddington's Marriage, 1608
The Entertainment at Britain's Burse, 1609
The Speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers, or The Lady of the Lake, 1610
Oberon, the Faery Prince, 1611
Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly, 1611
Love Restored, 1612
A Challenge at Tilt, at a Marriage, 1613
The Irish Masque at Court, 1613
Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists, 1615
The Golden Age Restored, 1616
Christmas, His Masque, 1616
The Vision of Delight, 1617
Lovers Made Men, or The Masque of Lethe, or The Masque at Lord Hay's, 1617
Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue, 1618
For the Honour of Wales, 1618
News from the New World Discovered in the Moon, 1620
The Entertainment at Blackfriars, or The Newcastle Entertainment, 1620

Pan's Anniversary, or The Shepherd's Holy-Day, 1620
The Gypsies Metamorphosed, 1621
The Masque of Augurs, 1622
Time Vindicated to Himself and to His Honours, 1623
Neptune's Triumph for the Return of Albion, 1624
The Masque of Owls at Kenilworth, 1624
The Fortunate Isles and Their Union, 1625
Love's Triumph Through Callipolis, 1631
Chloridia: Rites to Chloris and Her Nymphs, 1631
The King's Entertainment at Welbeck in Nottinghamshire, 1633
Love's Welcome at Bolsover, 1634

OTHER WORKS

Epigrams, 1612
The Forest, 1616
On My First Sonne, 1616
A Discourse of Love, 1618
Barclay's Argenis, translated by Jonson, 1623
The Execration against Vulcan, 1640
Horace's Art of Poetry, translated by Jonson, 1640
Underwood, 1640
English Grammar, 1640



Sources & Further Reading

Shakespeare and Jonson: Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared by G. E. Bentley

The Alchemists Handbook: Manual for Practical Laboratory Alchemy by Frater Albertus

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Alchemy by Dennis William Hauck

Ben Jonson: A Life by Ian Donaldson

Moving Shakespeare Indoors: Performance and Repertoire in the Jacobean Playhouse by Andrew Gurr and Farah Karim-Cooper

Ben Jonson and Theatre: Performance, Practice and Theory by Richard Cave, Elizabeth Schafer, Brian Woolland

The Path of Alchemy: Energetic Healing & the World of Natural Magic (Pathways to Enlightenment) by Mark Stavish

Authorship and Appropriation: Writing for the Stage in England, 1660-1710 (Oxford English Monographs) by Paulina Kewes

Alchemy & Mysticism (Hermetic Museum) by Alexander Roob

Sorcerer's Stone: A Beginner's Guide to Alchemy by Dennis William Hauck

Work and Play on the Shakespearean Stage by Tom Rutter

The Alchemist Exposed (National Theatre at Work) by Robert Butler

Shakespeare & Company: The Story of Lord Chamberlain's Men by Paul Brody and History Caps

Making Make-Believe Real: Politics as Theater in Shakespeare's Time by Gary Wills

Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare? by James Shapiro

Shakespeare's Friends by Kate Emery Pogue

The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson by Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart

Real Alchemy: A Primer of Practical Alchemy by Robert Allen Bartlett and Dennis William Hauck

Shakespeare's Stage Traffic: Imitation, Borrowing and Competition in Renaissance Theatre by Janet Clare

London Theatre Walks: Thirteen Dramatic Tours Through Four Centuries of History and Legend by Jum De Young and John Miller

Ben Jonson in Context by Julie Sanders

Performing Early Modern Drama Today by Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince