

The Alchemist



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BEN JONSON

Jonson was born in London, England, in 1572. His father, a clergyman, died just months before Jonson was born, and his mother later remarried a bricklayer when Jonson was still a toddler. Jonson was educated at Westminster School, and while he hoped to attend the University of Cambridge, he left school to become an apprentice bricklayer. Jonson soon abandoned bricklaying and traveled to the Netherlands, where he served as a volunteer English soldier in Flanders. He returned to England in the early 1590s to work as an actor and was awarded the role of Hieronimo in an early production of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Jonson married a London woman named Ann Lewis in 1594, and while it is said that they had a rather contentious marriage, the couple had several children, including a daughter who died in infancy and a son who died of the bubonic plague when he was just seven years old. By 1597, Jonson was working exclusively as a playwright, and he staged his first successful play, *Every Man in His Humour*, in 1598. When James I was crowned the King of England in 1603, Jonson became a respected writer of masques, a form of courtly entertainment that involves singing, dancing, and acting. He wrote *The Satyr* that same year, followed by *The Masque of Blackness* in 1605. Jonson's masques gained him royal favor and a pension of 60 pounds per year, and he began writing comedies, too, including *Volpone* in 1605, *Epicoene* in 1607, *The Alchemist* in 1610, and *Bartholomew Fair* in 1614. Beginning in the 1620s, Jonson's health and productivity began to decline. He suffered multiple strokes and died on August 16, 1637, at the age of 65. Since his death, Jonson has been regarded as one of the most talented and prolific writers and theorists of the English Renaissance.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the argument of *The Alchemist*, Ben Jonson claims a plague has swept London, sending much of the city's wealthy population to the countryside. This widespread illness is a reference to the bubonic plague, also known as the Black Death, which swept across Europe for centuries and killed millions of people. The disease, which is caused by bacteria carried by fleas and rodents, first surfaced around 1330 in Kyrgyzstan, a country in Central Asia. The Black Death reached Sicily in the 1340s and quickly spread across Europe. Symptoms of the plague varied, including acute fever and vomiting; however, most of those infected presented with buboes, an inflammation of the lymph nodes that often cracked open and oozed infected blood and pus. In some cases, the

plague even spread to the lungs, causing considerable respiratory problems, like shortness of breath and bloody sputa. In the early days of the Black Death, between 1346 and 1353, some 62,000 people were killed in the city of London alone. By the end of the 1350s, the plague began to die out, but it was never fully eradicated, and a Second Pandemic soon settled over Europe. Numerous outbreaks ravished the continent over the next several hundred years, including a flare-up in London that lasted from 1602 to 1611, which is presumably the outbreak Jonson refers to in the beginning of *The Alchemist*. The last outbreak of the Black Plague was reported in Madagascar in 2014, but modern medicine was able to stop the spread. In total, it is estimated that the Black Plague killed some 60% of Europe's population and reduced the world's population by over one million people in the 14th century alone.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* was first performed in 1610 by the King's Men, a London-based acting company, and it is generally regarded as one of the most popular plays of the English Renaissance. Other popular plays of the time include *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd; *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, both by William Shakespeare; and Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* and *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. Jonson's *The Alchemist* focuses on the natural philosophy of alchemy—an ancient area of scientific study and early form of chemistry—a topic that has a longstanding history in literature. Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and, more recently, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* all engage the topic of alchemy in some way. *The Alchemist* is also a biting satire and critique of 17th-century English society. Additional examples of satire and social critique through the ages include Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Alchemist*
- **When Written:** 1610
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1610
- **Literary Period:** English Renaissance
- **Genre:** Comedy
- **Setting:** London, England, in 1610 during an outbreak of the bubonic plague.
- **Climax:** Face's victims converge on Lovewit's house with the

police looking for justice, but Lovewit convinces them that his house has been shut up for weeks and was taken over by criminal conmen.

- **Antagonist:** Lovewit

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous Friends. In 1597, when Jonson staged his first successful play, *Every Man in His Humour*, William Shakespeare was one of the very first actors to be cast in the new production.

A Deadly Duel. In 1598, Jonson killed an actor named Gabriel Spencer in a duel and was sent to London's Newgate Prison for manslaughter. Jonson was sentenced to hang for his crime, but his life was spared with the help of a Jesuit priest. Afterward, Jonson converted to Catholicism, but he soon grew weary of the religion and converted back to Protestantism.



PLOT SUMMARY

Face, a London servant and conman, enters with Subtle and Doll Common, his criminal associates. Face's master, Lovewit, has fled the city for his country home on account of an outbreak of the plague, and Face is running a criminal operation out of Lovewit's city home in his absence. They are waiting for their first victim of the day: a law clerk named Dapper. Dapper is in search of a "familiar," a bit of alchemical magic that will help him win at cards and gambling, and Face has convinced him that Subtle is a respected mystic and doctor of alchemy. Dapper arrives and is greeted by Face in a captain's disguise. Subtle tells Dapper that he has the skill to conjure him a "familiar," but he is hesitant. Alchemical magic cannot be used to such immoral ends, Subtle says, but Dapper begs and promises to give half his winnings to Subtle and Face. Subtle agrees and tells Dapper that he must meet the "Fairy Queen" to get his "familiar," and she doesn't rise until the afternoon. He must come back, but he must first complete the ritual. Dapper must fast and place three drops of vinegar in his nose, two in his mouth, and one in each eye. Then, he must wash the tips of his fingers and his eyes and "hum" and "buzz" three times. Dapper agrees and immediately runs home.

Next is Abel Drugger, a local shopkeeper, who comes to Subtle looking for advice on his new business. He asks Subtle where he should place his door and shelves and how he should display his merchandise to guarantee success. Subtle tells Drugger that his new business should face south, and that he should place a magnet under the threshold of his door to attract business. He says that Drugger was born under a "rare star" and will be very lucky in business and in life. In fact, Subtle says, Drugger is so lucky, he might even come into possession of the **philosopher's stone**—a rare alchemical substance that is said to turn base metals to gold and produce the elixir of life, which

promises eternal youth and life. Drugger gives Subtle a handful of coins and excitedly rushes out the door. Face looks to Subtle. Since it is his job to find "gulls" like Abel Drugger, Face says, he clearly deserves a larger cut of the profits.

Sir Epicure Mammon arrives next, along with his friend Surly. Mammon believes that Subtle is busy creating the philosopher's stone for him, and Mammon has been talking around town as if he already has it. With the stone, Mammon will transform himself into a rich man, and he will cure the sick and stop the plague in its tracks. Surly doesn't believe in the magic of the philosopher's stone, and he thinks Face and Subtle are conmen; however, Mammon is convinced they are all legitimate. Face greets them dressed as an alchemist's assistant and says that Subtle is busy at "projection," one of the final stages of the alchemical process, after which the stone is created. Mammon tells Face all about his plans for the elixir, which he will also use to give himself unparalleled sexual prowess. He will have sex with 50 women a night, and he will line his bedchamber with mirrors, so his reflection is multiplied as he walks naked through his "*succubae*." Subtle enters and tells Mammon to go home and fetch all his metal and iron, for they will soon make "projection." Surly tries again to tell Mammon that Face and Subtle are conmen, but Mammon is distracted by Doll, who has just walked by. Mammon definitely wants to meet her when he comes back. Surly tells Mammon that Doll is clearly a prostitute and they are in a "bawdy-house," but Mammon won't hear it.

There is a knock at the door and Ananias, an Anabaptist who has come to barter for Mammon's metal and iron, enters. Ananias isn't impressed with Subtle and Face's fancy alchemical jargon, and he calls them "heathens." Subtle asks Ananias if he has brought money, but Ananias says he and his brethren will give Subtle no more money until they "see projection." Subtle angrily kicks Ananias out, claiming he will only negotiate with Ananias's pastor in the future. Face enters with Drugger, who tells him about a rich widow named Dame Pliant. Dame Pliant has come to town with her brother, Kestrel, who is looking for someone to teach him to quarrel and live by his wits. Kestrel is also looking for a husband for his sister, and he will only allow her to marry an aristocrat. Face tells Drugger that Subtle is the wittiest man in London, and he can read Dame Pliant's horoscope as well. Drugger agrees to bring Dame Pliant and her brother to see them, and Face excitedly tells Subtle about the widow. They briefly argue over who will get to marry Dame Pliant and ultimately decide to draw straws—and to not tell Doll.

Ananias returns with his pastor, Tribulation Wholesome. Neither men like nor trust Subtle and Face, and Tribulation even refers to Subtle as "antichristian," but they are willing to do what they must to get the philosopher's stone and further their religious cause. Tribulation apologizes to Subtle for Ananias's earlier visit, and Subtle tells him that he is still weeks

away from creating the stone, but he offers to teach them to melt pewter to cast Dutch money in the meantime. Tribulation says he will return to his brethren to determine if casting money is lawful and exits with Ananias. Face enters and says he has just met a Spaniard who is very interested in meeting Doll, and he is headed over later. There is a knock at the door, and Doll says it is Dapper, who has returned for his “familiar.” Face tells Doll to put on her “Fairy Queen” disguise and get ready. Subtle enters dressed as a “Priest of Fairy” and tells Dapper he must empty his pockets of all valuables before he meets the Queen. Subtle and Face dress Dapper in a petticoat—the only way the Fairy will meet him—and blindfold him. Suddenly, there is another knock at the door. It is Mammon, and since Face and Subtle don’t want Dapper and Mammon to meet, they gag Dapper with a rag and a gingerbread cookie and shove him in the privy.

Mammon enters with his metal and iron and asks where Subtle is. Face claims he is busy in his laboratory, so Mammon asks about Doll instead. Face claims Doll is a “rare scholar” and the sister of an aristocrat, and he says she has gone mad after reading the works of a Puritan scholar. Face offers to introduce Mammon to Doll, but Mammon must not mention religion, and he must keep their introduction quiet—if Subtle thinks Mammon has any ill intentions, he won’t give him the stone. Doll enters, and after Mammon sweet talks her a bit, they go to the garden for more privacy. Then, Subtle enters with Kestrel and Dame Pliant. Subtle agrees to teach Kestrel how to be witty, but first he must meet Dame Pliant. He kisses her and pretends to read her palm, and he tells her she will soon marry an aristocrat. Subtle escorts Kestrel and Dame Pliant to his office, where he can begin Kestrel’s lesson and read Dame Pliant’s fortune, and Face enters with the Spaniard.

The Spaniard is really Surly in disguise, but he pretends not to speak English, and Subtle and Face don’t seem to notice. They insult the Spaniard, believing he can’t understand them, and they openly admit they are out to “cozen” him. Then, Face and Subtle remember the Spaniard has come to see Doll, who is busy in the garden with Mammon. They begin to panic, but Face suggests they introduce the Spaniard to Dame Pliant. Subtle hesitates, wanting Dame Pliant for himself, but ultimately agrees. Face goes to fetch Dame Pliant and Kestrel and convinces them that the Dame is destined to marry a Spanish count, which, Face says, is the best sort of aristocrat. Kestrel agrees and orders his sister to the garden with Surly to get to know each other. Face, Kestrel, and Subtle exit, and Doll and Mammon enter. Doll is ranting and raving in an acute bout of insanity, and Mammon is unable to calm her down. Face enters and guides Doll out of the room, followed by Subtle, who is angry that Mammon has obviously behaved lustfully with Doll. He claims Mammon’s behavior will set “projection” back at least a month. There is a loud explosion from the other room, and Face rushes in, claiming the stone has burst into flames.

There is nothing to be spared, Face says, and Mammon leaves, convinced his sinfulness has cost him the stone.

In the meantime, Surly tells Dame Pliant that Subtle and Face are conmen. He tries to tell Kestrel as well, but Kestrel decides to test out his new quarreling skills and chases Surly from the house. Suddenly, Doll claims that Face’s master, Lovewit, has returned and is standing outside. Face tells Doll and Subtle to pack up their loot and get ready to leave, and then Face goes to shave. Lovewit is talking to the neighbors, who say a steady stream of people have been in and out of his house all month. Lovewit asks where his butler, Jeremy, is, but no one has seen him. Lovewit goes inside and is greeted by Face, who, since shaving, looks again like Jeremy the butler. He tells Lovewit he was forced to close up the house after the cat came down with the plague and has been gone for the past three weeks. The house must have been occupied by criminals in his absence, Face says. Suddenly, Face’s victims—Mammon, Surly, Kestrel, and the Anabaptists—converge on the house, looking for the “rouges” who tricked them, and Dapper appears, having eaten through his gag. Face knows he is caught, so he promises to introduce Lovewit to Dame Pliant if he promises not to punish him. Lovewit agrees and refuses to let in the angry victims, who go to fetch the police.

Dapper is still interested in meeting the “Fairy Queen,” so Face, Subtle, and Doll quickly pull one last scam. Doll disguises herself as the Queen, gives Dapper a bird for good luck, and promises to leave him trunks full of treasure and “some twelve thousand acres of Fairyland.” Dapper exits just as the police arrive, and Face tells Subtle and Doll they must leave before they are arrested. Lovewit has pardoned Face, but not them, and there is no time for them to take their profits. Doll and Subtle leave angrily, having been tricked and robbed by Face. Lovewit convinces the police that criminal conmen broke into his house in his absence, and he chases off Face’s angry victims. Lovewit turns to the audience and says he is very happy with his new wife, Dame Pliant, and Face says he is happy to get off “clean” from his crimes and “invite new guests.”



CHARACTERS

Face / Jeremy the Butler – Subtle and Doll’s criminal associate and Lovewit’s butler. After Lovewit escapes the city for the country during an outbreak of the plague, Face runs his criminal scams and cons out of Lovewit’s city home. Face represents transformation within Jonson’s play, and he easily changes as he greets each of his victims. When welcoming his victims—Dapper, Abel Drugger, Kestrel, and Dame Pliant—Face transforms into “Captain Face,” the close friend of Subtle the alchemist. Similarly, when Face cons Mammon and Surly, he receives them as a brilliant student of alchemy and Subtle’s assistant. When Lovewit returns, Face shaves his beard and transforms back into Jeremy the butler, Lovewit’s

unassuming servant. Like the alchemical substances Face pretends to create with Subtle, Face himself is always changing, which speaks to Jonson's broader argument that all people and things are constantly in flux. Face also represents deception in *The Alchemist* and personifies the many crooks and charlatans that practiced phony alchemy during Jonson's time. Face deceives his victims with each new disguise and con, stealing their money and trust, and he makes them believe he can deliver them perpetual youth and riches with the **philosopher's stone**. Face deceives Lovewit when he lies and uses his home for illegal purposes, and he also deceives Doll. The exact nature of Doll's relationship with Face and Subtle is never revealed; however, when Face and Subtle fight over who will marry Doll Pliant and decide to draw straws, they both swear not to tell Doll. Presumably, Doll will be jealous or hurt by Face and Subtle's infatuation with Dame Plaint, and they go to great lengths to cover it up. At the end of the play, Face deceives both Subtle and Doll and keeps all their profits for himself after the police arrive with their victims. Lovewit has pardoned him, Face says, not Subtle and Doll, and they must run or be arrested. Everything Face does and says is deceptive, and he represents the widespread deception that Jonson argues is rampant in broader society.

Subtle – A conman and Face and Doll's criminal associate. Subtle poses as a respected doctor of alchemy and mystic, and he cons several characters into believing he has the power to create the **philosopher's stone**. Dapper, a legal clerk, comes to Subtle for a "familiar," a bit of alchemical magic that will give him luck at cards and gambling, and Abel Drugger comes to Subtle looking for advice in building a new apothecary shop. Sir Epicure Mammon hires Subtle to create the philosopher's stone for him, as do the Anabaptists, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome. Drugger introduces Subtle to Kestrel and Dame Plaint—Kestrel is looking for a cunning man to teach him to quarrel and live by his wits, and Dame Pliant is hoping to have her fortune read. With each new victim, Subtle dons an alchemist's robes and plays his part flawlessly, impressing his unwitting prey with fancy jargon and advanced knowledge of alchemy. Like Face and Doll, Subtle represents transformation, but he also represents greed and deception. Subtle and Face are constantly arguing over who deserves the larger cut of their profits—Face maintains he does because he lures in their victims, but Subtle says he deserves more because he is the one who plays the alchemist—and Subtle tries to get Dame Plaint for himself, even though he promises Face they will draw straws to determine who gets to marry her. Subtle deceives each of his victims, but he is also deceiving Face, and he plans to skip town with Doll and cheat Face out of all their profits. After Lovewit returns and puts an end to their criminal business, Face deceives both Subtle and Doll. Face tells Subtle and Doll that Lovewit only pardoned him and they should run before the police find them and arrest them. Subtle and Doll exit angrily, wishing they had time to beat Face before leaving. Subtle also

represents the many crooked so-called alchemists of Jonson's time, which, while a legitimate branch of scientific study, was crawling with conmen and charlatans looking to dupe the unsuspecting public.

Doll Common – Face and Subtle's criminal associate. In addition to numerous other scams and cons, Face is running a brothel out of Lovewit's house, and Doll is his prostitute. When Abel Drugger visits Subtle and Face in search of a "familiar" to give him luck at cards and gambling, Doll dresses up as the "Fairy Queen," a keeper of sorts of alchemical magic. Dressed as the Fairy Queen, Doll dupes Drugger out of even more money and gives him a bird that she swears will bring him luck at the card tables. Doll catches Mammon's eye when he comes to Subtle for the **philosopher's stone**, and Face tells him that Doll is the sister of an aristocrat and a "rare scholar," who went insane after studying the works of a Puritan scholar. Face introduces Mammon to Doll—knowing Mammon will have sex with her and give Subtle an excuse not to give him the philosopher's stone—and they quickly retire to the garden for privacy, where they presumably have sex. Afterward, Mammon indirectly mentions religion (against Face's instructions), and Doll launches herself into an acute fit of insanity, excitedly quoting the same Puritan scholar who supposedly drove her to madness in the first place. After Lovewit returns and puts an end to Face's criminal enterprise, Doll and Subtle plan to skip out on Face and rob him of his share of the profits, but Face betrays them first and doesn't give them a chance to take their profits when the police come to Lovewit's with the victims. Doll represents transformation within *The Alchemist*, as her character is constantly changing and evolving, and she also underscores Jonson's religious argument. Doll's act as a "rare scholar" driven insane by Puritan works mirrors Jonson's condemnation of religious fanaticism, particularly radical Protestantism, which threatened to undermine the Protestant Reformation. Doll also represents greed and vice, namely sex. She is sexually linked to several of the characters, highlighting Jonson's argument that while sex out of wedlock is often considered a particularly immoral vice, it is a common sin committed by many.

Sir Epicure Mammon – Surly's friend and one of Face and Subtle's victims. Mammon has been funding Subtle's alchemy experiments for weeks, and Mammon is convinced that he will soon be in possession of the **philosopher's stone**. With the stone, Mammon plans to turn all the metal in London to gold, make the old young, and stop the plague in its track. Mammon also plans to use the stone to enhance his sexual prowess—enough to give him strength for 50 women a night—and he looks forward to lining the walls of his bedchamber with mirrors, so his reflection is multiplied as he walks naked through his "*succubae*." Subtle tells Mammon that the stone can only be used for the greater good and cannot be put to selfish or lustful ends, but Mammon lies and promises his

intentions are pure. While talking with Subtle, Doll walks by and catches Mammon's eye, and Face tells him that she is a "rare scholar" and the sister of an aristocrat who has gone mad studying the works of a Puritan scholar. Subtle later introduces Mammon to Doll, but he orders Mammon not to mention religion, which will send Doll into a fit of insanity. Mammon meets Doll, and they presumably have sex, after which he mentions religion and sends her into a rage. Subtle comes out of his laboratory and says Mammon has sent his work back at least a month with his lustful behavior, and after an explosion in the next room, Face runs in and says the stone has burst into flames. Mammon leaves feeling guilty, but he returns with Surly after discovering Face and Subtle's scam. Like the rest of the victims, Mammon is turned away by Lovewit and never receives justice, nor does he get back all the metal he gave Subtle to turn into gold. Mammon represents gullibility in Jonson's play, as he easily falls for Subtle and Face's con, but he also represents greed and vice. Mammon is chiefly concerned with getting rich and having sex with lots of women, which, Jonson implies, are very common sins.

Dapper – Face and Subtle's first victim. Dapper is a law clerk, and he is exceedingly gullible. When he arrives to see Subtle—who Dapper thinks is an alchemist and mystic—he is nearly late because he lent his watch to a thief the night before. Dapper is looking for a "familiar," a piece of alchemical magic to give him luck at cards and gambling, and he is hoping Subtle will help him. Subtle agrees but informs Dapper he must first meet the "Fairy Queen" (who is really Doll in disguise), so he orders Dapper home to complete the necessary ritual. Dapper must fast, apply vinegar to his nose and eyes, wash the tips of his fingers, and "hum" and "buzz" three times. Dapper rushes home to complete the ritual, and when he returns later to meet the Fairy Queen, Face and Subtle dress him in a petticoat and strip him of all his valuables. They blindfold him and run around him with Doll, pinching him and pretending to be the Queen's fairies. When Mammon shows up unexpectedly, they gag Dapper with a rag and piece of gingerbread and shove him in the bathroom. Dapper remains locked in the bathroom until he eats through his gag and finds Face in trouble with Lovewit. Dapper, however, is still looking to meet the Fairy Queen and get his familiar, so Doll dresses up in a fairy costume and dupes him out of even more money. As the Fairy Queen, Doll gives Dapper a bird and tells him to let some blood out with a pin once a week for good luck. She then promises to leave him trunks full of treasure and "some twelve thousand acres of Fairyland." Duped again and again, Dapper represents gullibility in *The Alchemist*. He easily falls for Subtle and Face's con, and he subjects himself to ridiculous rituals just to get the familiar. Furthermore, Dapper wants alchemical magic to help him win "all the games," not just some or even most of them. Like the other characters, Dapper is greedy and willing to do whatever it takes to get ahead, but this attitude only sets him back further.

Ananias – An Anabaptist and one of Face and Subtle's victims. The Anabaptists have been paying Subtle for weeks to create the **philosopher's stone**, and they send Ananias to Subtle to barter for Mammon's metal and iron, so they can later turn it all into gold. When Ananias arrives, he calls Subtle a "heathen" because he doesn't speak Hebrew, and he refuses to give Subtle any more money until he sees the stone. Subtle grows angry and kicks Ananias out, claiming he will only do business with the Anabaptist pastor, Tribulation Wholesome. Ananias returns with Tribulation, but they don't leave with the metal or the stone. Subtle tells them he is still weeks away from creating the stone, but he offers to teach them how to cast Dutch money in the meantime. Ananias and Tribulation return to their brethren to see if casting money is lawful, and once they decide it is, Ananias returns to Subtle to tell him. When he arrives, Subtle says the Anabaptists will have to find a new place to cast money and rushes Ananias off. Ananias later returns with the police and the rest of the victims after they discover Subtle and Face are conmen, but he is turned away by Lovewit and never gets justice. Like Tribulation Wholesome, Ananias represents religious fanaticism and radical Protestantism, but he also reflects the anti-Catholic sentiments of Jonson's time. Ananias despises traditions of all kinds, claiming they are all "Popish," and he prefers the term "Christ-tide" because it doesn't reflect the Popish "mass" in "Christmas." In the New Testament, Ananias was a member of the early Christian Church in Jerusalem, who was struck dead after lying to God about money, and this connection paints Jonson's Ananias in an equally unflattering light. Ananias and the Anabaptists are willing to resort to dishonest and unchristian means to advance their radical religious views, and Jonson condemns their actions and hypocrisy.

Surly / The Spaniard – Mammon's friend. Surly goes with Mammon to see Subtle about the **philosopher's stone**, but unlike Mammon, Surly does not believe that Subtle is an alchemist with the ability to create the stone. Surly tries to tell Mammon that Face and Subtle are conmen, but Mammon refuses to listen, so Surly disguises himself as the Spaniard to prove it. After Face sends Surly to the Tempest Church for a bogus meeting just to get rid of him, Surly dresses like a Spanish count and tricks Face into believing he is an out-of-town aristocrat looking for a prostitute. Face invites Surly back to the house to meet Doll, but when he arrives, Doll is already busy with Mammon. Surly speaks only Spanish and pretends not to understand English, so Face and Subtle insult him and openly admit they plan to con him, assuming he doesn't know what they're saying. Since Doll is occupied, Face and Subtle send Surly out to the garden with Dame Pliant, who also believes he is a Spanish count looking for a bride. Surly tells Dame Pliant that he is really a poor Englishman, and she agrees to marry him anyway, but her brother, Kestrel, disapproves. Surly tries to tell Kestrel that Subtle and Face are cons looking to scam them out of money, but Kestrel won't listen. He chases Surly out of the

house and down the street, where Surly is presumably able to convince Kestrel of the truth about Subtle and Face. Surly returns to Subtle and Face's at the end of the play with Mammon and the other victims, but they are turned away by Lovewit and never receive justice. The character of Surly represents transformation and deception in Jonson's play. His character transforms from Surly, Mammon's friend, to a "Spanish Don," and he manages to trick everyone, including Face and Subtle.

Kestrel – Dame Pliant's brother. A kestrel is a type of falcon that is known to aggressively beat its wings while hunting for prey on the ground, and Jonson's Kestrel is similarly aggressive. Kestrel's friend, Abel Drucker, takes him to see Subtle because they believe Subtle is an accomplished alchemist and mystic who can teach Kestrel to quarrel and live by his wits. Kestrel basically wants to be independently wealthy and intimidate others, like he does to his sister, whom he intends on marrying off to a rich aristocrat. Kestrel is cruel to Dame Pliant and threatens to beat and "maul" her if she doesn't do as he says. He forces her to kiss and entertain Face and Subtle, and when Surly arrives disguised as a Spanish count, Kestrel makes Dame Pliant agree to marry him. After Surly admits that he isn't really Spanish and that Subtle and Face are really conmen, Kestrel uses his new quarreling skills to chase Surly away. He chases Surly down the street, where he presumably learns the truth about Subtle and Face's scam. Kestrel returns to the house to get his sister, but he is met by Lovewit, who has already married Dame Pliant in his absence. Kestrel is furious and attempts to use his quarreling skills on Lovewit, but Kestrel is quickly intimidated and shut up. Kestrel represents gullibility and greed in Jonson's play. He easily falls for Subtle and Face's con, and he seeks Subtle's help as an alchemist to selfish ends. Kestrel's greed is also mirrored in his despicable treatment of his sister, whom he sees largely as an object that can bring him increased wealth and status.

Tribulation Wholesome – A pastor and Anabaptist. Tribulation and his brethren have also hired Subtle to create the **philosopher's stone**, and after Subtle kicks Ananias out when he comes to barter for Mammon's metal without any money, Tribulation must go to Subtle and smooth things over. Tribulation doesn't like Subtle or Face, and he even says that Subtle is "antichristian," but he is willing to do whatever he must to get his hands on the stone. Tribulation and the other Anabaptists are planning to use the stone to further their religious cause, even if they must resort to unchristian means to secure it. Subtle tells Tribulation that he is still two weeks away from creating the stone, but he offers to teach the Anabaptists to cast Dutch money in the meantime. Tribulation claims he will have to take it before the brethren to see if casting money is lawful, and, after giving Subtle more money, he promises to return. The brethren decide that casting money is indeed lawful, but when Tribulation returns to Subtle and

Face's, it is with the police after he learns they are conmen. Tribulation is ultimately turned away by Lovewit, Face's master, and so he never receives justice for the Anabaptists. Like Ananias, Tribulation Wholesome represents religious fanaticism, namely radical Protestantism, within Jonson's play. Tribulation is greedy and hypocritical, and he is willing to sacrifice his morals to ensure the spread of his radical religious convictions.

Dame Pliant – Kestrel's sister. Just as Dame Pliant's name suggests, she easily bends to her abusive brother's will and demands. She is a young and wealthy widow, and her brother has decided that she must marry again—this time to a rich aristocrat. Dame Pliant accompanies Kestrel to see Subtle and have her fortune read, and Subtle kisses her and tells her she will soon be the wife of an aristocrat. Dame Pliant is also wooed by Face, who, like Subtle, kisses her and promises to make her "a lady." When Surly arrives disguised as a Spanish count, Kestrel forces Dame Pliant to kiss him and says he will kick and "maul" her if she doesn't agree to marry him. Surly admits to Dame Pliant that he is really a poor Englishman, and she agrees to marry him anyway, until Kestrel chases him off with his new quarreling skills. At the end of the play, Dame Pliant is married to Lovewit, who she is tricked into believing is a Spanish aristocrat. Like Kestrel, Dame Pliant represents gullibility within Jonson's play. While Dame Pliant obviously has little choice but to obey her brother, she easily believes Subtle and Face's con, and she likewise believes that Lovewit is Spanish at the end of the play just because he wears a Spanish cloak.

Abel Drucker – One of Face and Subtle's victims. Drucker, who happens to sell the best tobacco in town, is the owner of a new apothecary shop. He believes Subtle is a respected alchemist and mystic, and Drucker is hoping Subtle can advise him in the building of his new shop to guarantee his success. Subtle tells Drucker that his new shop must face south and that he should place a magnet under the door to draw in business. He also tells Drucker that he will be a huge success and has a real chance at coming into possession of the **philosopher's stone**. Drucker later returns to see Face and Subtle with Kestrel and Dame Pliant, and when Surly attempts to tell Kestrel that Face and Subtle are conmen, Drucker helps Face and claims that Surly is the real con and owes Drucker for hair tonic and "six syringes." Near the end of the play, Drucker gives Face the Spanish cloak that Lovewit later wears to trick Dame Pliant into marrying him. Like many of the characters in *The Alchemist*, Abel Drucker represents greed and gullibility. He easily believes that Subtle is an alchemist with knowledge of the philosopher's stone, and he seeks Subtle's help to ensure his own personal wealth and success.

Lovewit – Face's master. Lovewit escapes the plague sweeping London for the countryside, and when he returns weeks later, he finds his butler, Jeremy—known to his criminal associates as Face—running illegal cons out of his home with Subtle and Doll.

Face convinces Lovewit not to punish him in exchange for Dame Pliant, a young and wealthy widow looking for a husband, whom Face has already promised a Spanish count. Face and Lovewit trick Dame Pliant into believing Lovewit is a wealthy Spanish aristocrat, and Lovewit and Dame Pliant are married in the play's final act. When Face's victims converge on Lovewit's house with police looking for justice during the last scene, Lovewit convinces them that his house has been vacant for weeks and was taken over by criminal conmen, who have long since fled. As the play closes, Lovewit addresses the audience and claims he is very happy with his rich, young wife. The character of Lovewit is a small part of the play—his name is never even spoken by the other characters—but he nevertheless represents deception and vice in *The Alchemist*. Lovewit agrees not to discipline Face for a young, rich woman, and he deceives others to help Face get away with his crimes.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



ALCHEMY AND TRANSFORMATION

Ben Jonson's play *The Alchemist* centers on the practice of alchemy, an ancient form of natural philosophy and early type of chemistry that sought

to create the **philosopher's stone**, a legendary alchemical substance that could transform base metals like lead and mercury into gold and silver. The philosopher's stone was also thought to produce the elixir of life, which promised to give whoever consumed it immortal life. Alchemy was considered a legitimate form of science in Jonson's day and many sought the power of the mysterious stone. With the philosopher's stone, the poor could be transformed into the wealthy, and the sick and old into the vibrant and youthful. In *The Alchemist*, Jonson juxtaposes the transformative powers of alchemy against the transformation of his characters. Jonson's characters are constantly changing, and as the main characters—Face, Subtle, and Doll—dupe unsuspecting victims into believing they have created the philosopher's stone, they likewise transform into different characters entirely. Through the depiction of transformation in *The Alchemist*, Jonson argues that all things—people included—are always in flux.

Throughout the play, Jonson makes repeated references to the transformative powers of alchemy and the philosopher's stone, which promises to bring limitless riches and health to Face, Subtle, and Doll's victims. When Subtle tells Doll about their victim Sir Epicure Mammon—who believes Subtle is a doctor of

alchemy and in possession of the philosopher's stone—Subtle claims that Mammon wants the stone and the elixir of life. According to Subtle, Mammon is “Searching the spittle, to make old bawds young; / And the highways for beggars to make rich.” Mammon is chiefly interested with the stone's transformative powers. As Mammon arrives at the house in which Face and Subtle are staging their con, he tells Face that after he purchases the philosopher's stone from Subtle, he will immediately begin transforming base metals: “This night I'll change / All that is metal in my house to gold.” Again, Mammon is interested in the stone because it can transform him into a rich man. Of course, Subtle doesn't actually have the philosopher's stone, so when Mammon arrives, Face tells him that Subtle has not yet completed the process. “[T]he red ferment / Has done his office,” Face says to Mammon. “Three house hence, prepare you / To see projection.” Here, Face refers to one of the final stages of transmutation, after which the philosopher's stone will be created and “projection”—the transformation of lead into gold—will be possible.

In addition to the transformations made possible through alchemy and the philosopher's stone, Jonson's characters likewise transform, which suggests that people are constantly evolving. Jonson's main character is a butler and conman known as Face to his criminal associates; however, in the presence of his victims, Face is a respected “Captain” and expert of alchemy. As each of Face's victims come and go, he is immediately transformed into another character completely. Likewise, Face's partner, a conman named Subtle, also transforms for the benefit of their victims. When each of their victims arrive, Subtle changes from a lowly criminal to a respected doctor of alchemy, who also happens to have knowledge of the philosopher's stone. Doll, a prostitute and criminal associate of Face and Subtle's, is also transformed throughout the play. To pull off their cons, Doll is transformed into the “Fairy Queen”—a keeper of sorts of the secrets of the philosopher's stone—and the sister of an aristocrat, who also happens to be a religious scholar.

Face is again transformed at the end of the play when Lovewit, the master of the house, returns. Lovewit has been gone to his country home for nearly a month, hoping to escape the plague that has hit London, and Face has been using Lovewit's London home to stage his schemes. With Lovewit's return, Face is transformed into Jeremy, Lovewit's unassuming butler, and his days of swindling gullible Londoners are over, at least for now. The transformative powers of alchemy are mirrored in the transformation of Jonson's characters, which ultimately suggests that all things, including people, are constantly changing and evolving.



RELIGION

Ben Jonson wrote *The Alchemist* in 1610, less than 100 years after the Protestant Reformation, a

movement in Western Christianity that sought to challenge the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1537, mere decades before Jonson's birth in 1572, King Henry VIII officially separated from the Catholic Church and formed the Church of England, a type of Protestantism that rejected papal authority. In the years following the Protestant Reformation and the creation of the Church of England, there was much tension between Protestants and those who refused to conform, as well as those Protestants considered to be radical, like Anabaptists and Puritans. There are repeated references to religion in *The Alchemist*, beginning with the play's dedication, in which Jonson claims "the truth of religion" is not "in the greatness and fat of the offerings, but in the devotion and zeal of the sacrificers." Jonson rejects the Catholic belief that sacraments represent religious grace regardless of the religious state of priests or parishioners, and in doing so, he effectively identifies himself as a Protestant. With the representation of religion in *The Alchemist*, Jonson mirrors the anti-Catholic sentiments of the time; however, and he also condemns religious fanaticism and those associated with radical Protestantism.

As part of his critique of radical Protestantism, Jonson makes several references to Hugh Broughton, a Puritan Old Testament scholar, who, during Jonson's time, was under self-imposed exile in Holland for his radical views of Protestantism. As conmen Face and Subtle try to swindle Mammon, their unsuspecting victim, they convince him that Doll, a prostitute and Face and Subtle's criminal associate, is the sister of a wealthy aristocrat. Face tells Mammon that Doll is "a most rare scholar," who has "gone mad with studying Broughton's works." Jonson not only implies that Broughton's works are rarely studied, he also suggests that Broughton's scholarship is nonsense and enough to drive others to insanity. Before Face introduces Mammon and Doll, Face warns Mammon as to Doll's madness. "But, good sir, no divinity i' your conference," Face says, "For fear of putting her in a rage—" Because Doll has supposedly studied the works of Broughton, a radical Puritan, the very mention of religion sends her into a fit of madness. After Doll and Mammon are introduced, Mammon indeed mentions religion, and Doll begins to unravel, ranting and raving and citing Broughton's *A Concoct of Scripture* (1590). Just as Doll is driven mad by Broughton's work, she quotes the Puritan in an acute fit of insanity, further portraying Puritanism as nonsense.

Jonson further condemns radical Protestantism through his depiction of the Anabaptists, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome, two of Face and Subtle's victims for their cons. When Ananias first meets Subtle, Ananias is confused by Subtle's use of alchemical jargon and claims not to know "heathen language." Subtle responds: "Heathen, you Knipperdollink?" Subtle's response is a reference to Bernhard Knipperdollink, a German Anabaptist and leader of the

Münster rebellion, a movement of radical Anabaptists that sought to overtake the city and bishop of Münster, Germany. With this reference, Subtle seems to imply that Ananias and the Anabaptists are the real "heathens." After Ananias tells Subtle his name, Subtle kicks Ananias out of the house. "Out, the varlet / That cozened the Apostles! Hence, away, / Flee, Mischief!" Subtle says. In the Book of Acts in the New Testament, Ananias was a member of the early Christian Church in Jerusalem who was struck dead after lying to God about money, and this connection paints Jonson's Ananias in an equally unflattering light. Neither Ananias nor Wholesome Tribulation like or trust Subtle and Face—they even refer to Subtle as "antichristian"—but they are willing to work with the conmen if it brings them profit. "Good brother," Tribulation says to Ananias, "we must bend unto all means / That may give furtherance to the holy cause." In other words, the Anabaptists are willing to do anything—even that which they consider unchristian—to further their religious cause, which makes the Anabaptists appear hypocritical and again paints such radical Protestants in an unflattering light.

The Alchemist is full of sin, vice, and unsavory characters of all kinds. Both Face and Subtle are conmen, Doll is a prostitute, and almost all the characters are greedy and self-serving; however, the Anabaptists, Ananias and Wholesome Tribulation, are the most despicable. The Anabaptists will do anything to get ahead and turn a profit, including counterfeiting money, which Tribulation and Ananias's brethren deem perfectly acceptable despite established English law. In this vein, Jonson condemns the Anabaptists and all forms of religious fanaticism, which threatened to undermine the Protestant Reformation.



SEX AND GREED

Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* is rife with vice and sin. The play focuses on Face and Subtle, two conmen who pose as expert alchemists with knowledge of the **philosopher's stone** to swindle unsuspecting Londoners—known in the play as "gulls"—out of money and loose metal. Face and Subtle work closely with Doll, a prostitute who helps to lure and scam their victims, and each of the "gulls" they target are in search of alchemy and the philosopher's stone to selfish ends, such as personal wealth and sexual prowess. In the prologue, Jonson claims the play is set in London, as "No clime breeds better matter for your whore, / Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more." Jonson deliberately highlights vice and sin, primarily sex and greed, and those who commit such moral crimes are the basis of his satire; however, Jonson does not attempt to pass moral judgement on such sinners, and he doesn't explicitly condemn their behavior. Instead, Jonson maintains that he only hopes to encourage such sinners to be "better men." With the widespread depiction of sex and greed in *The Alchemist*, Jonson highlights the frequency with which such sins are committed and ultimately

argues that such behavior is merely human nature.

In addition to Doll's career as a prostitute, there are multiple references to sex within the play, which suggests that almost everyone is having sex, despite the popular belief that sex should be confined to marriage. As the play opens, Face and Subtle are the middle of an argument, and Doll fears their loud voices will alert the neighbors to their illegal activities, so she silences them with sex. Subtle and Face agree to draw straws after supper, and "the longest cut, at night, / Shall draw thee for his Doll Particular." In other words, whoever draws the longest straw gets to spend the night with Doll. When Mammon, one of Face and Subtle's victims, believes he will soon possess the philosopher's stone, he plans to use the elixir of life to give him sexual strength and stamina—enough "to encounter fifty [women] a night." Then, Mammon says, he will fill his room with mirrors, "to disperse / And multiply the figures as I walk / Naked between my *succubae*." What Mammon means is that he wants the philosopher's stone so he can have sex with 50 women—in this case prostitutes—each night. As Mammon is waiting for Subtle to finish creating the philosopher's stone, Mammon sneaks off to have sex with Doll, a decision which causes the stone to supposedly burst into flames. According to Subtle, the philosopher's stone can only be created for those with pure intentions, and Mammon's behavior with Doll proves he isn't pure. Of course, Subtle isn't an alchemist, and he doesn't have possession of the philosopher's stone. Subtle knows that Mammon would seduce Doll if given the chance, and it is the perfect excuse to explain Subtle's inability to produce the philosopher's stone.

In addition to sex, *The Alchemist* is also rife with greed, which implies that greed is similarly common and widespread. The argument between Face and Subtle that occurs at the beginning of the play begins because Subtle claims "a primacy in the divisions" and says he "must be chief." As the one posing as the alchemist, Subtle believes he deserves to be in charge and get a larger cut of the profits. Subtle is greedy, and he wants more money than Face, who only lures their victims into the trap. When Face lures their first victim, a local clerk named Dapper, to Subtle, Dapper claims to be in search of "a familiar," a bit of alchemical magic that will give him an advantage in cards and gambling. "I would have it for all games," Dapper says to Subtle, proving he is just as greedy as the rest of them. Mammon, too, proves to be greedy. With the philosopher's stone, Mammon hopes to change all the loose metal in his house to gold, and then he will move on to the metal belonging to others. "And early in the morning," Mammon says, "will I send / To all the plumbers and the pewterers, / And buy their tin and lead up; and to Lothbury, / For all the copper." Mammon isn't satisfied with just a little bit of gold; he wants as much as he can possibly get his hands on.

It is not only Face, Subtle, and their victims who are guilty of the sins of greed and inappropriate sex. After Lovewit—Face's

master and the owner of the house where Face and Subtle execute their cons—returns home from the country to find his butler, Face, running an illegal operation out of his house, Face convinces Lovewit not to punish him. "I'll help you to a widow," Face says. "In recompense, that you shall gi' me thanks for, / Will make you seven years younger, and a rich one." Lovewit agrees not to punish Face in exchange for Dame Pliant, a young, rich woman. Lovewit proves himself to be just as greedy and interested in sex as the rest of the characters, which, Jonson thus implies, are very popular sins. Jonson states in the prologue that theatergoers will find in his play "things they'd think, or wish, were done." In short, the vices in Jonson's play, especially greed and sex, are "natural follies" that "doers may see, and yet not own." With this, Jonson implies that most people are guilty in some way of greed and sex, even if they don't admit it.



DECEPTION AND GULLIBILITY

Deception and gullibility are the very foundation of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. The play is based on two conmen, Face and Subtle, who use deception to "cozen," or trick, gullible Londoners into believing they are experts of alchemy in possession of the **philosopher's stone**. The very practice of alchemy itself connotes deception and gullibility. Alchemy was viewed as a legitimate branch of science in Jonson's day; however, the field of alchemy was also known to be saturated with imposters and charlatans—frauds looking to swindle unsuspecting people who turned to alchemy for valid reasons. Alchemy, an early form of chemistry, was credited with the discovery of many important medicines, and since Jonson's play takes place during a major plague, it is no wonder his characters want so badly to believe in the power of alchemy. Face and Subtle are not the only characters in *The Alchemist* to use deception, and when Face and Subtle deceive each other, they prove to be just as gullible as their victims. Deception and gullibility are everywhere in *The Alchemist*, and, Jonson thus implies, in the real world as well. Jonson draws attention to the unfortunate reality of deception and ultimately argues that everyone is at risk of being duped.

Most of Jonson's characters employ deception in some way, implying that deceptive practices are common in broader society. Face and Subtle's con depends on them convincing their victims that they are experts in alchemy. As such, Subtle dresses in long robes and claims to be a respected doctor of alchemy. Face pretends to be one of Subtle's students, and they dupe their victims into believing their story through costumes and speaking in alchemical jargon. Surly, the friend of Mammon (one of Face and Subtle's victims), suspects that Face and Subtle are cons when they promise to deliver the philosopher's stone. To expose them as frauds, Surly arrives at Face and Subtle's house disguised as a Spaniard. Surly's deception works, and even though it does him little good, he exposes Face and

Subtle as frauds. Doll, Face and Subtle's criminal associate, likewise uses deception to dupe their victims. Dressed as the "Fairy Queen," Doll convinces Dapper, a clerk and their first victim, that she is the keeper of the magic of the philosopher's stone. Like most of the deception depicted in *The Alchemist*, Doll manages to convince Dapper of her mystical identity.

In addition to the successful deception of many of Jonson's characters, their victims—who are otherwise intelligent people—prove to be incredibly gullible, especially Dapper, a law clerk and Subtle and Face's first victim. This gullibility implies that even smart people are vulnerable to deception. When Dapper first arrives at Face's door, he tells Face that he nearly didn't make it. The night before, Dapper lent his watch "to one / That dines today at the sheriff's and so was robbed / Of [his] pass-time." Dapper is immediately portrayed as gullible, as he borrowed his watch to a thief without realizing it. Dapper, who comes to Face and Subtle in search of a "familiar"—a bit of alchemical magic that will give him luck at gambling and cards—instantly believes Face and Subtle when they tell him that he must obtain such "familiar" from the "Fairy Queen." Furthermore, Dapper believes the ritual Face and Subtle insist must be completed before meeting the Fairy. They claim Dapper must first fast and "take / Three drops of vinegar in at [his] nose; / Two at [his] mouth; and one at either ear; / Then bathe [his] fingers' ends; and wash [his] eyes." Dapper must also "hum" and "buzz" three times, and only then will the Fairy see him. Dapper proves to be exceedingly gullible, and he immediately rushes home to complete the ritual. Before Dapper finally meets the Fairy Queen (who is, of course, Doll in disguise), Face and Subtle convince him that he must greet her in a petticoat. Dapper again proves himself gullible and dresses in a petticoat, and he further allows Face and Subtle to blindfold him and gag him with a rag and "a piece of gingerbread" shoved into his mouth. Dapper submits to each of these humiliations just to meet the Fairy Queen and get his "familiar."

Face, as it turns out, is deceiving everyone and is really a butler named Jeremy. His master, Lovewit, returns from the country at the end of the play to find Jeremy posing as Face and running cons out of his home with Subtle. Jeremy manages to convince Lovewit not to punish him by bribing Lovewit with Dame Pliant, a beautiful, young woman, and when Face's victims converge on the house with police looking for the conmen who swindled them, Lovewit claims his house has been closed up for nearly a month and was broken in by criminal conmen, who have long since fled. Lovewit likewise uses deception, and the police and the victims fall for his lies, which further speaks to the deception and gullibility of broader society.

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

Throughout *The Alchemist*, Ben Jonson makes repeated references to the philosopher's stone—an alchemical substance that is said to transform base metals like copper and tin into gold and silver and also produce the elixir of life, an additional substance which promises to give eternal life and youth to anyone who consumes it. In the play, the stone represents alchemy as an entire field, but it also symbolizes deception and greed. Subtle is a con who claims to be an alchemist in possession of the philosopher's stone, and his victims, Abel Drugger, Sir Epicure Mammon, and the Anabaptists, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome, each want to get their hands on the stone. Subtle, of course, doesn't have the stone, and Jonson likewise implies that no alchemist, real or imagined, has access to the stone. Jonson appears to put little stock in alchemy, especially the philosopher's stone, which was considered a legitimate branch of study in Jonson's time.

Each of Subtle's victims want the philosopher's stone to satisfy selfish and greedy ends. Abel Drugger wants the stone to bring him wealth and guarantee his new apothecary shop is successful, and Sir Epicure Mammon wants the stone to turn all the metal in his house, and all the metal in England, into gold. He also wants the stone to secure him the elixir of life, which he is hoping will give him unlimited sexual prowess and stamina. The Anabaptists, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome, want the stone to selfishly advance their radical religious beliefs, which will be much easier with endless money and the influence that comes along with it. According to legend, the philosopher's stone can only be created or possessed by those with pure and pious intentions that promise to serve the greater good; however, all of Jonson's characters are lustful and greedy, and they plan to use the stone to deceptive ends that fulfil their own needs rather than those of broader society.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *The Alchemist and Other Plays* published in 2008.





SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

The Dedication Quotes

☞ In the age of sacrifices, the truth of religion was not in the greatness and fat of the offerings, but in the devotion and zeal of the sacrifices: else, what could a handful of gums have done in the sight of a hecatomb? Or how might I appear at this altar, except with those affections that no less love the light and witness than they have the conscience of your virtue? If what I offer bear an acceptable odour, and hold the first strength, it is your value of it which remembers where, when, and to whom it was kindled. Otherwise, as the times are, there comes rarely forth that thing so full of authority or example but by assiduity and custom grows less, and loses. This yet safe in your judgement (which is a Sidney's) is forbidden to speak more, lest it talk or look like one of the ambitious Faces of the time, who, the more they paint, are the less themselves.

Related Characters: Face / Jeremy the Butler

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis


This passage, which occurs in Jonson's dedication to Lady Mary Wroth, an actor and patron of the arts, establishes Jonson as a Protestant and also introduces the theme of deception in *The Alchemist*. Jonson claims the "truth of religion" is not in the value of "offerings," which refers to the Catholic belief that sacraments relay religious grace regardless of the holiness of the priest or worshiper. Jonson clearly doesn't agree with this belief, which aligns him with Protestantism. He refers to the stage as an "altar" and mentions the "light," and this choice of language makes Jonson's play seem like a religious experience—to Jonson at least.

Jonson is seeking Lady Wroth's approval for his play. As an actor and a patron of the arts, Jonson trust her "judgement (which is a Sidney's)." Lady Wroth's father, Robert Sidney, is also a patron of the arts and a poet, and Jonson clearly trusts his judgement as well. Jonson's reference to "the ambitious Faces of the time," harkens to the play's main character, who deceives everyone he meets. In this vein, Jonson warns the reader, and Lady Wroth, of the deceptive nature of broader society and the many dishonest people who seek to dupe and victimize others.

☞ If thou beest more, thou art an understander, and then I trust thee. If thou art one that tak'st up, and but a pretender, beware at what hands thou receiv'st thy commodity; for thou wert never more fair in the way to be cozened than in this age in poetry, especially in plays: wherein now the concupiscence of dances and antics so reigneth, as to run away from Nature and be afraid of her is the only point of art that tickles the spectators.

Related Characters: Subtle, Face / Jeremy the Butler

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 213



Explanation and Analysis

Here, Jonson addresses the reader directly, which implies that Jonson intended for his play to be read as well as viewed. More importantly, this passage also reflects Jonson's primary argument as to the deceptive nature of broader society. Jonson says that for those who try to understand "art," they stand the chance to be "cozened," or tricked, into believing art is good when it isn't, "especially in plays." He claims that plays full of "dances and antics" can confuse one as to what is good art, and he doesn't want to trick his spectators. Jonson seems to be simply critiquing art; however, his play serves as a very specific allegory, and his words here lend insight into this analogy.

The word "Nature" harkens to alchemy, the play's primary theme and a field of natural philosophy. During Jonson's time, alchemy was considered a legitimate science, but society was saturated with charlatans and imposters who claimed to be alchemists just to dupe people out of money. Using his play, Jonson warns spectators of the very real threat of encountering a dishonest alchemist much like Subtle or Face. Jonson doesn't come right out and say alchemy is nonsense, but he does imply that very few are legitimately working on medicine and chemistry, and none of them have the power to create the philosopher's stone and turn tin to gold.

Prologue Quotes

☝☝ Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known
 No country's mirth is better than our own.
 No clime breeds better matter for your whore,
 Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more,
 Whose manners, now called humours, feed the stage,
 And which have still been subject for the rage
 Or spleen of comic writers. Though this pen
 Did never aim to grieve, but better men,
 Howe'er the age he lives in doth endure
 The vices that she breeds, above their cure.
 But when the wholesome remedies are sweet,
 And in their working, gain and profit meet,
 He hopes to find no spirit so much diseased,
 But will, with such fair correctives, be pleased;
 For here, he doth not fear, who can apply.
 If there be any, that will sit so nigh
 Unto the stream, to look what it doth run,
 They shall find things they'd think, or wish, were done;
 They are so natural follies, but so shown,
 As even the doers may see, and yet not own.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 215-216

Explanation and Analysis

This rather lengthy passage, which occurs near the beginning of Jonson's prologue, identifies London as the scene of the play and introduces the importance of vice in *The Alchemist*. Jonson's play is a satire and comedy, and he focuses on the sinful—the “whore, / Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more.” Jonson implies there are a lot of sinful people in London, making it the perfect place to set the play; however, he doesn't seem to condemn his characters or London's sinful citizens. He only wants to make them “better,” which he intends to do by satirizing their behavior and making fun of them.


Jonson includes vices that are considered particularly taboo and immoral in society, like greed, dishonesty, and inappropriate sex (sex during Jonson's time was strictly confined to marriage), and he suggests that many people are committing such sins, even if they don't easily admit to it. Jonson implies that many people will watch his play (look “Unto the stream”) and find some familiar vice. Jonson argues such vices are “natural follies” that “even the doers may see, and yet not own.” Jonson argues these vices are human nature, and in pointing this out, he hopes to improve his spectators and broader society.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

☝☝ And you, too,
 Will give the cause, forsooth? You will insult
 And claim a primacy in the divisions?
 You must be chief? As if you only had
 The powder to project with? And the work
 Were not begun out of equality?
 The venture tripartite? All things in common?
 Without priority? 'Sdeath, you perpetual curs,
 Fall to your couples again, and cozen kindly
 And heartily and lovingly, as you should,
 And lose not the beginning of a term,
 Or, by this hand, I shall grow factious too,
 And take my part, and quit you.

Related Characters: Doll Common (speaker), Subtle, Face / Jeremy the Butler

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, spoken by Doll in the first act, both underscores Face's greed and reflects Doll's identity as a prostitute, further highlighting sex within the play. Face and Subtle have been fighting, and Doll reveals why in this quote. Face has claimed “primacy in the divisions” and demanded a larger share of the profits. He says that he is “chief” and leader of their crew and deserves more money than the rest of them. Doll corrects him; Face doesn't have the “powder to project with”—which means he doesn't have Subtle's knowledge of alchemy and the philosopher's stone.

Doll implies they each play a part in the scheme: Subtle is the alchemist, Face is the conman who lures their victims, and Doll further cons their victims out of money through sex. Together they are the “venture tripartite,” and they are all equal and share their profits “in common.” Face has no greater claim to the profits, but he claims it anyway because he is greedy. Doll begs Face and Subtle get along and “cozen kindly,” or their dispute threatens to destroy their agreement (the “beginning of [their] term”). If Face and Subtle can't agree to that, Doll will “quit,” and take her “part”—that is, what she brings to the table through sex and prostitution.

☛ For which, at supper, thou shalt sit in triumph,
And not be styled Doll Common, but Doll Proper,
Doll Singular: the longest cut, at night,
Shall draw thee for his Doll Particular.

Related Characters: Face / Jeremy the Butler (speaker), Doll Common, Subtle

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Doll promises to have sex with Face and Subtle if they stop fighting, and it is significant because it further reflects the prevalence of sex in the play, and in broader society by extension. Here, Face and Subtle agree to draw straws to determine which of them gets to have sex with Doll. Whoever “triumph[s]” will be introduced not to “Doll Common,” a prostitute who has sex with the “common” lot of men, but as “Doll Proper, / Doll Singular,” who for the night will offer herself to only one of them—if they stop fighting, that is.

“The longest cut,” or the longest straw, will win Doll, and they will draw after dinner. The longest straw will draw “Doll Particular,” Face says. Jonson repeatedly refers to sex as Doll’s “Particular,” which is what he does here as well. Doll easily agrees to this, and the men think nothing of it either, which implies they see sex as no big deal and certainly nothing sinful or full of vice. In this vein, Jonson suggests that many people, especially those in London, feel or behave similarly, even if they don’t openly admit it.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

☛ Yes, Captain, I would have it for all games.

Related Characters: Dapper (speaker), Face / Jeremy the Butler, Subtle

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in the first act, when Dapper says he wants a “familiar” for “all the games,” and it is significant because it reflects Dapper’s greed. Dapper is a law clerk, and he believes Subtle is a powerful alchemist who can conjure a “familiar”—a bit of alchemical magic that can give Dapper luck at gambling and cards. Dapper initially told

Face (who he believes is a “Captain”) that he only wanted the “familiar” for Friday nights and the occasional bet after work, but Dapper has decided he wants to quit his job and live entirely off gambling.

Like all the characters in *The Alchemist*, Dapper is greedy. He doesn’t just want a bit of luck—and, so it goes, a bit of money—he wants as much as he can possibly get. According to legend, alchemy can only be used for the greater good, but Dapper is only looking to use alchemy to rip people off and make himself rich. Dapper is attempting to use alchemy to selfish ends, just as Subtle and Face *are* using alchemy to selfish ends. In this vein, Jonson implies that alchemy is particularly risky and likely to draw those who are dishonest.

☛ Sir, against one o’clock, prepare yourself.
Till when you must be fasting; only, take
Three drops of vinegar in at your nose;
Two at your mouth; and one at either ear;
Then bathe your fingers’ ends; and wash your eyes,
To sharpen your five senses; and cry ‘hum’
Thrice; and then ‘buzz’, as often; and then, come.

Related Characters: Subtle (speaker), Dapper

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis



This quote also occurs in the first act, when Subtle explains to Dapper the ritual he must complete before meeting the “Fairy Queen.” Subtle has told Dapper that he must meet the “Fairy Queen”—a reference to Edmund Spenser’s epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*—the leader of the fairies and keeper of all magic and Fairyland. This claim alone is ridiculous, but Dapper easily accepts it, and he further agrees to Subtle’s ritual.


If Dapper wants to meet the Fairy Queen and get his “familiar,” he will have to begin fasting at 1:00. Then, Dapper must instill vinegar in his nose, mouth, and ears. He must wash just the tips of his fingers, “wash [his] eyes,” and “hum” and “buzz” three times, and only then will he be ready to meet the Fairy Queen. This detailed and seemingly random list is completely ridiculous, but again, Dapper falls for it. He is more than willing to adhere to the ritual to get his “familiar,” which also speaks to his greed and how badly he wants to cheat at cards and strike it rich.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

☞☞ Methinks I see him entering ordinaries,
Dispensing for the pox; and plaguy houses,
Reaching his dose; walking Moorfields for lepers;
And offering citizens' wives pomander-bracelets
As his preservative, made of the elixir;
Searching the spittle, to make old bawds young;
And the highways for beggars to make rich.
I see no end of his labours. He will make
Nature ashamed of her long sleep, when art,
Who's but a stepdame, shall do more than she,
In her best love to mankind, ever could.
If his dream last, he'll turn the age to gold.

Related Characters: Subtle (speaker), Sir Epicure Mammon, Doll Common

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis


Here, Subtle explains to Doll why Mammon wants the philosopher's stone. This passage reflects the transformative powers of alchemy and the philosopher's stone, and it also emphasizes Mammon's greed. Subtle has been conning Mammon for some time and has been taking Mammon's money to supposedly finance the creation of the philosopher's stone. Mammon has already been bragging about town that he has the stone, and his claims reflect the stone's power.


According to legend, the philosopher's stone is an alchemical substance that can turn base metals to gold. The stone also produces the elixir of life, which promises to cure any illness and restore one's youth. Mammon has been going to those with the "pox" and "plaguy houses" claiming he can cure their illnesses, and he promises to give citizens "pomander-bracelets," which are said to protect against leprosy. With the stone, Mammon has promised "to make old bawds young" and "beggars" rich. While Mammon clearly plans to put the stone to good use and cure the sick and provide for the poor, he is still greedy and intends to "turn the age to gold." Like the other characters, Mammon isn't satisfied with a little when he can have a lot.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

☞☞ For I do mean
To have a list of wives and concubines
Equal with Solomon, who had the stone
Alike with me; and I will make me a back
With the elixir that shall be as tough
As Hercules, to encounter fifty a night.

Related Characters: Sir Epicure Mammon (speaker), Face / Jeremy the Butler

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 239



Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs in the second act, when Mammon explains to Face what he really plans to do with the philosopher's stone, and it is important because it underscores Mammon's lustfulness and the ill intentions he has for the philosopher's stone. With the stone, Mammon plans to use to the elixir of life to give himself unparalleled sexual strength and stamina. Solomon was said to have had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and Mammon wants just as many.

Some alchemists believe Solomon's wisdom and strength was due to his own possession of the philosopher's stone, and Mammon refers to this here when he claims Solomon "had the stone." Mammon knows that the stone can only be used for the greater good and cannot be put to lustful or sinful ends, but he cares very little. He wants the stone to make him "as tough / As Hercules," so he has the strength to have sex with 50 women each night. Instead of piety, Mammon's desire for the stone is rooted in greed and gluttony for sex and women.

☞☞ I will have all my beds blown up, not stuffed;
Down is too hard. And then mine oval room
Filled with such pictures as Tiberius took
From Elephantis, and dull Aretine
But coldly imitated. Then, my glasses
Cut in more subtle angles, to disperse
And multiply the figures as I walk
Naked between my *succubae*.

Related Characters: Sir Epicure Mammon (speaker), Face / Jeremy the Butler

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mammon continues to explain to Face why he wants the philosopher's stone, which will garner him riches and wealth. He plans to live in absolute luxury, with good beds that aren't "stuffed" with "down," which he claims is "too hard." In other words, Mammon will have nothing but the best, which underscores his greediness and ill intentions for the stone.



Mammon also promises to fill his room with art when the stone makes him rich, only he will display art like Tiberius did, which is a reference to a Roman emperor who was said to have displayed exotic picture depicting the poetry of the Greek poet Elephantis and the Italian poet Pietro Aretino. Not only does Mammon plan to spend his newfound wealth on art, he plans to buy pornographic art, which reflects his lustfulness and greed. Furthermore, he plans to line his walls with mirrors, or "glasses," so his reflection is "multiplied" as he walks naked through his concubines, which further emphasizes his insatiable lustfulness.


Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

☝☝ Pray you, sir, stay.

Rather than I'll be brayed, sir, I'll believe,
That alchemy is a pretty kind of game,
Somewhat like tricks o'the cards, to cheat a man
With charming.

Related Characters: Surly / The Spaniard (speaker), Sir Epicure Mammon, Subtle

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 247


Explanation and Analysis

This quote also occurs in the second act, when Surly tells Subtle he won't be duped by his con. While this implies that Surly isn't as gullible as Mammon, it also suggests that alchemy is really just nonsense. Subtle has convinced Mammon that he is an alchemist and is close to creating the

philosopher's stone, but Surly isn't convinced. Not only does Surly insist Subtle isn't an alchemist, he suggests that alchemy in general is a hoax. Surly says that "alchemy is a pretty kind of game," which implies it is a scam, similar to "tricks o'the cards." In this way, alchemy is nothing but a rip-off intended to "cheat a man" out of trust and money. Alchemy was considered a legitimate form of science in Jonson's day, and many men claimed to be alchemist, but Jonson suggests that many, if not all of them, are comen like Subtle. While it is impossible to say for certain that Jonson believes alchemy is nonsense like Surly does, he certainly seems to suggest that, at the very least, alchemy is full of deceitful cons like Subtle, and it should be approached with extreme caution.

☝☝ You're very right, sir; she is a most rare scholar,
And is gone mad with studying Broughton's works.
If you but name a word touching the Hebrew,
She falls into her fit, and will discourse
So learnedly of genealogies,
As you would run mad, too, to hear her, sir.

Related Characters: Face / Jeremy the Butler (speaker), Doll Common, Sir Epicure Mammon

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Face tells Mammon that Doll is really a scholar and the sister of an aristocrat. This quote reflects Jonson's disapproval of religious fanaticism, and of radical Protestantism is particular. Face claims Doll is a "rare scholar" who has "gone mad with studying Broughton's works," a reference to Old Testament Puritan scholar Hugh Broughton. Furthermore, Face's claim that Doll is a "rare scholar" suggests that Broughton's works are rarely studied, which further implies his religious views aren't worth reading and paints Puritanism in a negative light. Puritans were considered religious fanatics in Jonson's time, and their views undermined the progress of the Protestant Reformation. As a Protestant, Jonson objects to such views, and his language here reflects this. Face claims that if Mammon even mentions religion—that is, utters "a word touching the Hebrew"—Doll will launch into a religious tirade that will drive Mammon himself insane, which again reflects the low regard Jonson has for Broughton and Puritanism.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

☛☛ Out, the varlet

That cozened the Apostles! Hence, away,
Flee, Mischief! Had your holy consistory
No name to send me of another sound
Than wicked Ananias?

Related Characters: Subtle (speaker), Ananias

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which occurs near the end of the second act, Subtle kicks Ananias out because he doesn't have any money. On a deeper level, this passage reflects Jonson's disapproval of religious fanaticism, and Anabaptists in particular. An Anabaptist is a radical Protestant who supports the baptism of adult believers only, believing that only an adult can openly and truly commit to Christ, and Subtle's poor treatment of Ananias here precisely because he is an Anabaptist implies Subtle doesn't much care for their religious beliefs.


According to the Book of Acts in the New Testament of the Bible, Ananias was an early Christian in Jerusalem who was struck dead after lying to God about money, which is what Subtle refers to here when he says Jonson's Ananias "cozened the Apostles." Subtle claims Ananias is "wicked" and his brethren should have known better than to send such a wicked man, which implies the Anabaptists as a whole are wicked as well. Like Jonson, Subtle is presumably a Protestant, and he doesn't approve of Anabaptists, whose radical views of religion threaten to undo the progress of the Protestant Reformation, which sought to replace Catholicism with Protestantism in England and across Europe.

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

☛☛ Good brother, we must bend unto all means
That may give furtherance to the holy cause.

Related Characters: Tribulation Wholesome (speaker), Subtle, Ananias

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, spoken by Tribulation Wholesome, appears in the third act, and it is important because it depicts Tribulation, and all Anabaptists by extension, as hypocritical. Ananias and Tribulation both agree that they do not like Subtle, and they don't trust him either. Tribulation even says that Subtle is unchristian, but Tribulation is willing to work with Subtle anyway if it means Tribulation can secure the philosopher's stone and get rich.

As the pastor and elder of the Anabaptists, Tribulation should be pious and holy, but he tells Ananias that they "must bend unto all means" to get the stone, even if those means are unchristian. The Anabaptists want the stone to further their "holy cause," which is to say they want money to spread their radical religious views across the continent; however, Jonson implies here that their message is weak and their religious views inferior to Protestantism, which, presumably, doesn't stoop to such unchristian behavior to further its own cause.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

☛☛ I hate traditions;

I do not trust them—

Peace

They are Popish, all!

I will not peace. I will not—

Ananias.

Please the profane; to grieve the godly; I may not.

Related Characters: Tribulation Wholesome, Ananias (speaker), Subtle

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Subtle mentions the "traditions" of alchemy, underscoring the anti-Catholic sentiments of Jonson's time. Subtle—and, by extension, Jonson—obviously doesn't agree with most of the Anabaptists' religious views, but he does agree on their dislike for Catholics. The Protestant Reformation sought to replace Catholicism with Protestantism in England and across Europe, and during Jonson's time, Protestants, including radicals like Anabaptists, often despised the Catholics and their religious views.



Ananias, who is clearly a religious fanatic, becomes undone

at the mere mention of “traditions,” which harkens to the Catholic practice of giving scripture and tradition equal religious authority. Protestants consider the Bible the only true religious authority, so Ananias, a radical Protestant, cannot bear and doesn’t trust any traditions. He calls all traditions “Popish,” which is to say all traditions are in some way Catholic. Like many of the Protestants during Jonson’s time, Ananias consider even the slightest reference to Catholicism “profane.”

Act 3, Scene 5 Quotes

☝☝ 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.

Related Characters: Subtle (speaker), Dapper

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Subtle convinces Dapper he is about to meet the “Fairy Queen,” reflecting the widespread gullibility present in the play, and, Jonson thus implies, in broader society when it comes to believing in alchemy and trusting deceptive alchemists. Dapper has been forced through a ridiculous ritual, made to wear a petticoat, and now Subtle is selling him a song and dance about the Fairy Queen (who must bless Dapper’s “familiar,” the alchemical magic he hopes to get from Subtle) being busy with dinner. There seems to be no end to Dapper’s gullibility and his desire to believe that Subtle is really an alchemist.


Subtle easily convinces Dapper that the Fairy Queen has sent him “a dead mouse / And a piece of gingerbread” so he doesn’t “faint” with hunger after fasting for most of the day. Subtle claims the Fairy Queen is so caring and kind, she has sent the cookie, even though it is “better for [Dapper],” and his chances of getting a familiar, if he holds out and continues his fast. Subtle’s con is absolutely preposterous, and, Jonson implies, so are the cons of real-life alchemists who dupe unsuspecting people into believing they actually have alchemical power and magic.

Act 4, Scene 1 Quotes

☝☝ Sweet Madame, let me be particular—
Particular, sir? I pray you, know your distance.

Related Characters: Doll Common, Sir Epicure Mammon (speaker), Face / Jeremy the Butler, Subtle

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis



This passage, which represents an exchange between Mammon and Doll, further highlights the lustfulness and sex that pervades most of the play. Mammon has asked to meet Doll because he wants to have sex with her. Doll is a prostitute, but Mammon doesn’t know this; he simply wants to have sex with Doll because he is lustful. Mammon seems to believe that Doll has simply agreed to have sex with him, which suggests that casual sex is quite common in society, despite popular opinion during Jonson’s time that sex should be confined to marriage only.

Jonson repeatedly refers to sex as Doll’s “particular,” and when Mammon asks here to “be particular,” he is effectively saying he wants to have sex with Doll. Doll’s response, in which she plays a little hard to get, refers to the lustfulness of Mammon’s request. She tells him to “know [his] distance,” to stop being so fresh, but Doll has no intention of denying him. Subtle and Face expect Mammon to behave lustfully and come on to Doll, so they can withhold the philosopher’s stone from him on account of his vice. They are banking on him trying to have sex with Doll, which again reflects the widespread lustfulness of broader society.

Act 4, Scene 7 Quotes

☝☝ Be silent: not a word if he call or knock.
I’ll into mine old shape again, and meet him,
Of Jeremy the butler. I’ the meantime,
Do you two pack up all the goods and purchase
That we can carry i’ the two trunks. I’ll keep him
Off for today, if I cannot longer; and then
At night, I’ll ship you both away to Ratcliffe,
Where we’ll meet tomorrow, and there we’ll share.
Let Mammon’s brass and pewter keep the cellar;
We’ll have another time for that. But, Doll,
Pray thee, go heat a little water, quickly,
Subtle must shave me.

Related Characters: Face / Jeremy the Butler (speaker), Sir Epicure Mammon, Lovewit, Doll Common, Subtle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs in the fourth act, after Lovewit has returned home and spoiled Face and Subtle's con, and it illustrates Face's transformation into Jeremy the butler and also hints to Face's greed and deceptive intentions. Since Lovewit has left the city for the country, Face has grown a beard and transformed himself into a criminal con, leaving behind his identity as Jeremy the butler, Lovewit's servant. Face claims he must get into his "old shape again" to meet Lovewit, which means he must change back into Jeremy and shave first.

Face tells Subtle and Doll to pack up all the profits they have made with their cons and leave them with him. He tells them to go to "Ratcliffe," the dock that leads out of London, and, presumably, out of England. Face says he will meet Doll and Subtle at the dock later, but the fact that he will have all their profits and Mammon's metal, which is obviously too bulky to transport, suggests that he is planning to deceive them. Face has already tried to scheme a higher portion of the profits, and it isn't looking good that Face will actually keep his word. Face does ultimately deceive Doll and Subtle, which reflects the deception present in broader society and the danger the average person is in of being duped—even if they, too, are deceitful and corrupt.

Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

☝☝ Sir, you were wont to affect mirth and wit—
But here's no place to talk on't i' the street.
Give me but leave to make the best of my fortune,
And only pardon me th' abuse of your house:
It's all I beg. I'll help you to a widow,
In recompense, that you shall gi' me thanks for,
Will make you seven years younger, and a rich one.

Related Characters: Face / Jeremy the Butler (speaker), Dame Pliant, Lovewit

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in the fifth act, after Lovewit returns

home and catches Face running his scams out of Lovewit's house, and it is significant because it further underscores the greed and lustfulness that pervades most of the play. Here, Face knows he is caught. All of his victims have converged on the house, accusing him of deception and trickery, and there is no way Face can continue convincing Lovewit that he has nothing to do with the illegal scams.

Face begs Lovewit not to punish him and leave him "to make the best of [his] fortune," meaning Face wants Lovewit to let him keep his profits and "pardon [him] th' abuse of [his] house." To convince Lovewit, Face offers to help Lovewit marry a "widow"—Dame Pliant—which appeals to Lovewit's own lustfulness and greed. Dame Pliant is young and beautiful, "seven years younger" than Lovewit, and she is rich. Just as Face banks on Mammon's lustfulness to keep his scam going, Face banks on Lovewit's lustfulness and greed to keep him out of trouble, which again implies that lustfulness and greed are very common sins.

Act 5, Scene 5 Quotes

☝☝ So I will, sir. Gentlemen,
My part a little fell in this last scene,
Yet 'twas decorum. And though I am clean
Got off, from Subtle, Surly, Mammon, Doll,
Hot Ananias, Dapper, Druggier, all
With whom I traded; yet I put myself
On you, that are my country; and this pelf
Which I have got, if you do quit me, rests
To feast you often, and invite new guests.

Related Characters: Face / Jeremy the Butler (speaker), Abel Druggier, Dapper, Ananias, Doll Common, Sir Epicure Mammon, Surly / The Spaniard, Subtle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 326

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which occurs at the very end of *The Alchemist*, implies that Face hasn't learned a thing and plans to go right on conning people, which further reflects the widespread deception and trickery present in broader society and suggests that such behavior is human nature and therefore very common. Face gets off "clean" for all his cons. He isn't punished by his master, he isn't arrested, and he is even allowed to keep all his profits, including Mammon's loose metal. The law hasn't punished Face, but he asks the audience to act as his jury.

A “pelf” is money gained through dishonest means, and Face wants the audience to decide if his is guilty of such an offense. If the audience decides to “quit,” or acquit him, then Face will be free to enjoy his spoils, eat fancy food, “and invite new guests,” presumably to further deceive and con

out of money in some way. Face doesn’t intend to straighten up and live an honest life, which again suggests that vice, such as deception and greed, is merely human nature and can’t be completely avoided. Thus, others must anticipate such behavior and account for it.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE DEDICATION

Jonson dedicates his play “to the Lady most deserving her name and blood: Mary, Lady Wroth.” In biblical times, Jonson says, the “truth of religion” was not to be found in the value of the offerings, but in the dedication of the sacrificers. If not, what would some offerings be compared to 100 oxen? Jonson comes to this “altar” with a love for the “light,” seeking Lady Wroth’s approval, which, if his play is any good, is the only thing that matters. Jonson places his play “safe in [her] judgement (which is a Sidney’s).” Everyone else, Jonson says, is but “the ambitious Faces of the time, who, the more they paint, are the less themselves.”

Jonson also addresses the reader. For those readers who truly understand art, Jonson trusts them with his play; however, it is the “pretenders” who must be warned. In poetry, and especially in plays, those who pretend are fair prey to be “cozened.” In this day, lustful dances and plots ignore “Nature,” the only “point of art” that pleases spectators. Jonson questions what art is when the critics have grown stubborn and ignorant. Critics celebrate writers like they do “fencers or wrestlers,” and those plays with the most violence receive the most attention. Jonson admits there are some such plays that are “good and great,” but such greatness is rare, and it doesn’t make up for the rest. In closing, Jonson again warns the reader that there is a big difference between plays that “utter all they can, however unfitly,” and those that are more selective.

Mary Wroth (which was also spelled Worth, making her “most deserving of her name and blood”) was an actor and a patron of the arts, as was her father, Robert Sidney, who was also a poet. As patrons of the arts, Mary Wroth and her father understand art, and Jonson trusts them to judge the quality of his play. Jonson immediately references religion and alludes to the Catholic belief that religious sacraments offer grace, regardless of the spirituality of the priest or worshipers. Jonson clearly disagrees with this notion, which firmly positions him as a Protestant. Presumably, Jonson’s mention of the “altar” and “light” are references to the stage and theater, which paints his play in a religious light. This passage also introduces the theme of deception. The “ambitious Faces of the time” harkens to Jonson’s main character, Face, a conman of many disguises, who, with each costume change, is less like himself. Jonson applies this concept to broader society and implies widespread deception.



Again, Jonson doesn’t seem to believe that just anybody can understand and appreciate great art, and those who pretend are at risk of being “cozened,” or tricked. Jonson implies that most plays are full of violence and vice, which “pretenders” are duped into believing is quality art. Jonson argues the opposite. Jonson’s play isn’t violent, but it has plenty of vice, which seems to be the “Nature”—in this case, human nature—that is the “point” of Jonson’s play and most pleasing to spectators. In opening his own play, Jonson takes the time to criticize those plays that are “unfit” or unworthy of artistic praise.



THE ARGUMENT

Jonson's argument appears as an acrostic poem, and the first letter of each line spells "The Alchemist." He explains that a terrible plague has swept London, and the master of a house has fled to his country home, leaving his city home under the care of his servant. The servant is a "cozener," as are his associates, and they have been looking for a house in which to setup shop. Thus, they use the master's house as a place for their "narrow practice" and agree to split the profits. They attract much business and "much abuse," and they sell "fortunes," "bawdry," and "the **stone**."

The appearance of Jonson's argument as an acrostic poem suggests that Jonson intended for his play to be read as well as watched. Jonson repeatedly uses the word "cozener," which is someone who tricks or deceives others, and the "narrow practice" his characters set up refers to the vice and sin involved in their criminal enterprise. The word "bawdry" implies they are running a brothel, and "fortunes" and "the stone" harkens to alchemy, mysticism, and the philosopher's stone.



PROLOGUE

This play takes place in London, Jonson says, because there is no better place than London to find "whore, / Bawd, squire, impostor, and many persons more." These are the people on which this play is based, as their behavior serves as the "spleen of comic writers." Jonson, however, does not wish to criticize such people and wishes only to make them "better men." There are many vices in life, Jonson warns, and such vices are "natural follies" that many may do, "and yet not own."

Jonson immediately confirms that his play is about vice, as he intends to focus on "whores" and "impostors," and he also establishes that his play is a comedy, and more specifically, a satire. Satirical works are usually written for the betterment of society, and Jonson confirms this as well when he says he wants to make people "better." This passage also implies the frequency with which people indulge in such vices. London is full of sinful people, Jonson says, and he further implies that such vices are "natural follies," or simply part of human nature, which many commit but don't admit or "own."



ACT 1, SCENE 1

Face, a servant, enters with a sword. He is accompanied by Doll Common and Subtle, who is carrying a small glass bottle. Face and Subtle are arguing loudly, and Doll tells them to quiet down before the neighbors hear. The home of Face's master is in the Friars, and they don't want to draw attention to themselves. Face and Subtle continue to argue and insult each other, and Face recounts where he first met Subtle—at "Pie Corner," looking thin and starved, his face "full of black and melancholic worms." It is a wonder Subtle should have been so hard up, Face suggests, with all Subtle's "alchemy and [his] algebra" and all his "cozening." Despite all this, Face says, he has still given Subtle clients and a house "to practise in." Subtle is quick to point out that the house doesn't belong to Face.

The "Friars" is a reference to the Blackfriars, an area of London and the name of the theater where Jonson's play was acted in 1610. From Face and Subtle's argument, the reader can infer that they aren't seeing eye to eye, and that one is trying to claim superiority over the other, presumably to claim more profits from their illegal operation. "Pie Corner" is a reference to a marketplace in London where cheap food is sold, and Face thus implies that Subtle is poor and has a very bad complexion (his face is "full of black and melancholic worms"). Face also alludes to Subtle's con—"alchemy and algebra"—and takes credit for giving them Lovewit's house to "practise," or stage their cons in. Subtle points out that the house belongs to Lovewit, not Face, which implies Face is no better than Subtle and they both deserve an equal share.



Subtle claims that he found Face in such a shameful state that no one else would keep Face company, and he brought Face “to spirit, to quintessence, with pains” so great, Subtle should have the “philosophers’ work” twice over. Now, Subtle says, Face is causing trouble before the “projection.” Face threatens to publically accuse Subtle of sorcery, and Doll asks the men if they plan to undo their plans with fighting. Subtle and Face continue shouting, and Doll grabs the sword from Face and smashes the glass from Subtle’s hand. They have “cozened” so long, Doll says, they have begun to “cozen” each other.

Subtle’s insults of Face are full of alchemical references. He implies that making Face fit and believable for their con was so difficult, Subtle should already have the “philosopher’s work”—or the philosopher’s stone—for his efforts. Subtle also refers to “projection,” one of the final stages of the alchemical process, to mean the execution of their con. This passage speaks to the level of deception within the play. Just as Face and Subtle deceive their victims, Doll implies they are also deceiving each other, and that no one is immune to this kind of behavior.



Doll asks Face if he really plans to accuse Subtle of sorcery, and she asks Subtle if he really plans to “claim primacy in the divisions.” Must Subtle be “chief,” Doll asks, or can there be some equality? She begs the men to get along, or she will quit and leave them. Doll finally convinces the men to stop arguing by promising her “Particular” to whoever draws “the longest cut” later at dinner. Suddenly, the bell rings. Subtle worries it is Face’s master, Lovewit, but Face promises his master is far from London. It is a law clerk named Dapper, whom Face swindled the night before. Dapper is in search of a “familiar” to help him win at gambling, so Face orders Doll out of the room and tells Subtle to go and change.

Ostensibly, Subtle is trying to “claim primacy in the divisions” and declare himself “chief” to get a larger cut of the profits. Subtle is greedy, and Face is, too, since he has threatened to turn Subtle in for sorcery, which is illegal and punishable by law. From Face’s references to sorcery, alchemy, and algebra, the reader can infer that Subtle has been posing as an alchemist. Doll’s “Particular” is a reference to sex (she is clearly a prostitute, hence her name Doll Common), and she has offered to have sex with whoever draws the longest straw—provided the men stop bickering. The nonchalant and easy way in which Doll offers sex to the men suggests sex is not uncommon in their relationship.



ACT 1, SCENE 2

“Captain, I am here,” Dapper says, addressing Face. Face welcomes him and says he is glad to see him. Dapper claims he nearly didn’t make it; he lent his watch the night before to someone who “dines today at the sheriff’s.” Subtle enters wearing an alchemist’s robes. Dapper asks Face if Subtle is the “cunning man” and doctor, and Face assures him that Subtle is indeed a “cunning man” and doctor. Subtle asks Face if he has already spoken with Dapper about the matter, and Face claims he has. Dapper interrupts and promises he will be most grateful, but Subtle isn’t convinced.

Clearly, Dapper believes that Face is a captain and Subtle is a brilliant, or “cunning,” doctor of alchemy. Dapper is obviously very gullible—he believes easily in Face and Subtle’s scam and he lent his watch to a thief, who has been arrested and “dines today at the sheriff’s.” Not only does Dapper fall for Subtle and Face’s scheme, he is practically begging them to help him, and Subtle plays a little hard to get.



Face asks Subtle what he is so afraid of, and Subtle says that he fears Dapper will draw him to “apparent danger.” Face asks if Subtle means to say that he fears a “horse draw” and “halter,” and Subtle confirms he does. Face and Dapper tell Subtle to have no such worries. Dapper is no cheat, Face says, and no one is planning to “tell the Vicar.” Subtle argues that if he does give Dapper a “familiar,” he will be able to win any game he plays. Face assures Subtle he is wrong. Dapper only asks for “cups, and horses, / A rifling fly,” but Dapper corrects him. Dapper wants a “familiar” for every game.

While alchemy was not illegal in Jonson’s time, sorcery was, and Dapper wants Subtle to use magic to secure him a “familiar.” A “familiar” is alchemical magic, and Dapper wants it to give him luck at gambling. Dapper, too, is greedy, and he wants to win every game he plays. Subtle pretends he is worried that giving Dapper such magic will get him in trouble with the “Vicars,” who were in charge of rooting out sorcery and magic, and Subtle will be dragged by horses to the “halter,” or gallows, where he will be executed for breaking the law.



Subtle is smug. See, he says to Face, it is just as he suspected. Face is shocked. Dapper said he only wanted a familiar to help with games on Friday nights, or the occasional bet after work. Yes, Dapper says, but now he is thinking that he will leave the law and wants a familiar to cover all the games. This changes everything, Face says, looking to Subtle. Subtle takes Face to the side. Dapper, Subtle says, is loved by the “Fairy Queen,” and he is very lucky. Dapper overhears and again promises that he will be very grateful and will split his winnings with Subtle and Face.

Face tries to convince Subtle to give Dapper the “familiar.” Dapper could leave here tonight, Face says, and win 5,000 pounds. With half, they would be rich, too. Yes, Dapper agrees, he can make them very rich indeed. Face tells Dapper that he was born under a “rare star” and is connected to the Fairy Queen. Dapper was born with a “caul,” Face says, and Dapper hands him money. Face looks to Subtle and asks him when Dapper will have his “familiar.” Dapper is confused. Doesn’t he get it now, he asks. No, Subtle responds. A “familiar” requires a complicated ritual; it isn’t just handed over. Dapper must first be “bathed and fumigated,” and the Fairy Queen doesn’t get up until the afternoon.

The Fairy Queen must bless the “familiar,” Subtle says. Suddenly, there is a knock at the door. Subtle turns to Face and quietly tells him to see Dapper out the back door, and then Subtle turns to Dapper. Dapper must fast, Subtle says, and place three drops of vinegar in his nose, two in his mouth, and one in each ear. Then, Dapper must wash the tips of his fingers and his eyes, “hum” and “buzz” three times, and then return. Subtle turns and leaves the room. Face asks Dapper if he can remember all that, and Dapper assures him that he can. As Face walks Dapper to the back door, he reminds him to put on a clean shirt, too.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Subtle enters with Abel Drugger. Subtle asks Drugger if he sells tobacco, and Drugger confirms he does. “Free of the Grocers,” he adds. Subtle asks what business Drugger has with him, and Drugger explains that he is in need of Subtle’s “necromancy” to help him with his shop. Drugger’s business is new, and he wants to know where he should place doors and shelves. He would also like to hear his horoscope as well, Drugger says. Face enters and is happy to see Drugger. Drugger is honest, Face says, and he always has the best tobacco. Drugger’s tobacco smells like roses, and he is “no goldsmith.”

*Again, Dapper is very greedy. He doesn’t just want luck with the occasional bet; he wants to quit his job and live entirely off his dishonest winnings. Subtle and Face clearly want Dapper to overhear them. The “Fairy Queen” is a reference to Edmund Spenser’s epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590), in which Fairyland and the fairies are ruled by one powerful queen. Dapper is again very gullible and believes in the Fairy Queen and her approval.*



Subtle implies here that Dapper must actually meet the Fairy Queen to get his familiar, and Dapper again believes him. A “caul” is a thin membrane covering the face and eyes at birth, which is often thought to be a good omen. Face refers to Dapper’s horoscope and claims his luck and connection to the Fairy Queen are written in the stars, which Dapper doesn’t have a problem believing either. The complicated ritual and need to “bathe and fumigate” before seeing the Queen is quite ridiculous, but Dapper easily believes it all.



Not only is Dapper gullible enough to believe Spenser’s Fairy Queen is real, he also believes in magic and that she must bless it, which again suggests he is very easily duped. The ritual Subtle orders Dapper to complete is completely ridiculous, but he is willing to do it to get his familiar and satisfy his greed. Subtle tells Face to sneak Dapper out the back door, which suggests they don’t want their victims running into each other.



Drugger’s name suggests he owns an apothecary shop, and his reference to the “Grocers” means that he is a member of the Grocers’ Company, which includes apothecaries and enables Drugger to sell tobacco. “Necromancy” is communicating with the dead to foresee the future, and Dapper believes Subtle has this power. Drugger wants Subtle to divine the future to ensure his business is successful, which suggests that Drugger is also greedy. In Jonson’s time, goldsmiths often operated as bankers, and they were notoriously crooked. In claiming Drugger is “no goldsmith,” Face means to say that Drugger is honest.



Subtle says that Drugger is indeed a lucky man, and he is sure to be wealthy and popular. By next spring, Subtle says, Drugger is sure to be appointed sheriff of London. Drugger's "fortune," however, says he will go a different route. Face asks Subtle how he knows all this, and Subtle explains that his knowledge of "metoposcopy" tells him as much. Face can't see it, Subtle says, but Drugger has a star upon his forehead and spots on his teeth. His pinky fingernail, too, is telling. Subtle asks Drugger if he was born on a Wednesday, and Drugger confirms he was. It is just as Subtle suspected, he says. Drugger will be a very successful merchant.

Subtle tells Drugger that the door of his new shop should face south, and the broadside of the building should face west. Subtle says Drugger should also place a magnet under the threshold of his door to attract customers, and he concludes by saying he thinks Drugger has a good chance of coming into possession of the **philosopher's stone**. Drugger is obviously excited and gives Subtle a handful of coins. As Drugger leaves, he hands Face his almanac and asks if Subtle can mark his unlucky days, so he will know not to do business then. Face takes the almanac and agrees. Drugger thanks them both and exits. Face turns to Subtle. It is his job to bring people like Drugger in, Face says, and Subtle still doesn't see that Face deserves more money.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

Doll enters and looks out the window. She can see Sir Epicure Mammon coming up the street, and he has someone with him. Subtle turns to Face and tells him to quickly go change. Doll asks why, and Subtle explains that Mammon thinks Subtle has created the **philosopher's stone** for him. Mammon has been talking around town for the last month as if he already has it. He has visited those with the plague and the pox—even the lepers outside the city—and he promises to soon cure them. Mammon plans to turn the old young, and he will make beggars rich. "If his dream last," Subtle says, "he'll turn the age to gold."

Subtle's reference to Drugger's "fortune" refers both to his fortune that Subtle reads now, and the fortune Drugger will later make. Sheriffs are appointed by the king and service is compulsory, unless one can afford to pay to release themselves from responsibility. Thus, Subtle implies that Drugger will have enough money to avoid serving as sheriff. "Metoposcopy" is reading one's fortune by the lines on their forehead, and Subtle also refers to chiromancy, or palmistry, to tell Drugger's fortune by studying his hands. In both cases, Drugger again proves himself to be exceedingly gullible, and Subtle proves to be exceedingly deceptive.



Face again implies that he deserves a larger cut of the profits, which further speaks to his greed. The philosopher's stone is an alchemical substance that can change base metals to gold and produce the elixir life, which promises eternal youth and life to anyone who consumes it. The stone is symbolic of alchemy in Jonson's play, but it is also symbolic of greed and deception. The philosopher's stone doesn't exist, but Dapper believes it does, and he also believes it will make him rich and powerful beyond his wildest dreams.



Clearly, Face must don a new disguise to meet Mammon. Face has been posing as a captain, but Mammon obviously believes he is someone else entirely. The philosopher's stone, which also represents transformation, promises to turn the whole world to gold, and it has the power to heal the sick and make the old young again. Mammon has some good intentions for the stone, but his desire is equally rooted in greed, as he wants to "turn the age to gold."



ACT 2, SCENE 1

Sir Epicure Mammon enters with his friend, Surly. Mammon is excited; creating the **philosopher's stone** is supposed to take years, but Subtle has done it in just 10 months. Today is the day, Mammon tells Surly, when the world becomes rich. After today, there won't be any reason to cheat at dice or cards, and there will be no need to ever charge anything again. Everyone will have the most luxurious satins and velvets, and no one will want for a thing. There will be no need for brothels, and there won't be so many drunk soldiers and gamblers starting trouble. "No more of this," Mammon says, "young viceroys."

Face yells to Mammon from another room and tells him that they will be out soon. Mammon explains to Surly that the man yelling is Subtle's "fire-drake, / His lungs, his Zephyrus, he that puffs his coals." Mammon continues his excitement. Tonight, when he goes home, he plans to turn all his metal into gold. And then, in the morning, he will go to every pewterer and plumber he knows and buy up all their tin and copper. Surly can't believe it. Does he plan to turn it all to gold? Yes, Mammon says, and he will buy Devonshire and Cornwall, too.

Surly doesn't believe Mammon. The **philosopher's stone** must be a hoax, he says. When Surly sees "th' effects of the great medicine" he will believe, Mammon claims. Surly still isn't convinced. It is true, Mammon says. Subtle has perfected the "elixir," and it can "confer honour, love, respect, long life, / Give safety, valour—yea, and victory, / To whom he will." With the elixir, Mammon can restore one's years and give a man longevity like the "ancient patriarchs" simply by giving them a minute amount of elixir once a week. Surly is dubious, but if Mammon is right, the prostitutes at "Pict-hatch" will thank him, Surly jokes.

The elixir can cure any illness, Mammon tells Surly, and once he has it, Mammon plans to put an end to the plague. Surly still doesn't believe him and says he cannot be "transmuted" by the **philosopher's stone**. If Surly won't believe him, Mammon says, he will believe historical record. Mammon knows of books in which Moses, Solomon, and Adam have written of the philosopher's stone. How else can one explain "Irish wood" or Jason's fleece? Or "Pythagoras' thigh" and "Pandora's tub," he asks? These are all, Mammon says, "abstract riddles of our stone."

Mammon's claim that with enough money there will be no more "young viceroys" plays on the word "vice," which Jonson has already identified as the basis for his play. In this way, Jonson thus implies that vice is directly related to poverty and need; however, since ridding the world of poverty and need is unrealistic, Jonson insinuates there will always be vice. Mammon, too, proves himself to be gullible. Not only does he believe in the philosopher's stone, he believes Subtle has created it faster than anyone else.



Mammon frequently refers to Face as "Lungs," which means he is Subtle's alchemical assistant and explains why Face had to remove his captain's disguise. Mammon's desire to turn all the metal in his house to gold and then buy up all the copper and tin, too, suggests he is very greedy. Mammon is even planning to buy Devonshire and Cornwall, where copper and tin are mined, so he can turn it all to gold. Mammon isn't happy with just a bit of wealth; he wants as much as possible.



Surly isn't gullible and easily duped like Mammon, and he doesn't believe that Subtle has created the stone; however, Mammon claims the "great medicine," or elixir of life, made from the stone will turn him into a believer. In Jonson's time, many believed the elixir could bestow all the things Mammon lists here. The "ancient patriarchs" is a reference to the biblical Adam and Moses, who were said to have lived over 800 years because of the elixir. Surly's joke about the prostitutes at Pict-hatch, a London brothel where many of the women were infected with syphilis, again suggests that sex a common vice in London and broader society.



In alchemy, base metals that are turned to gold are said to be "transmuted," and Surly makes a play on this word here, as he claims he can't be "transmuted," or transformed into a believer of alchemy. With the plague, a particularly deadly illness, taking over London, it is no wonder that Mammon and others want to believe in the elixir of life, as it is the only sure way to save their lives from the illness. Furthermore, Mammon uses alchemy and the stone to explain biblical stories and ancient myths, like "Irish wood" (St. Patrick's ability to chase insects out of Ireland), Pythagoras's brilliance, Pandora's box, and Jason's golden fleece.



ACT 2, SCENE 2

Face enters dressed as an alchemist's assistant. Mammon instantly asks if Subtle has been successful in creating the **stone**, and Face promises it will be ready soon. The "red ferment" has set about Subtle's lab, and they should "see projection" in just three hours. Mammon is pleased; his only concern is finding material to "project on." London will not be enough. Face is surprised. Not even if Mammon takes the roofs from the churches and leaves them "bare, as do their auditory," Face asks? No, says Mammon, but he will clear Face's complexion and cure his brain, which must be affected by the fumes of metals.

Mammon tells Face that he plans to have as many wives and concubines as Solomon, and with the elixir, he will have the strength of Hercules and "encounter fifty a night." He will have many comfortable beds, and he will fill his home with priceless art. Next, he will line the walls of his chamber with mirrors "to disperse / And multiply the figures" as he walks naked through his "*succubae*." He will live in absolute luxury and make everyone rich.

Face goes to check on Subtle and the **stone**, leaving Mammon alone with Surly. Mammon continues listing all the stone will bring him, and Surly comments that Subtle must be a "pious, holy and religious man." He must be absolutely free from sin, Surly says. Mammon assures him that Subtle is. Purity is what the stone brings, Mammon says. He can hear Subtle coming, and he tells Surly not to use "profane words" in Subtle's presence. "'Tis poison," Mammon warns.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Subtle enters and is greeted by Mammon. Subtle immediately asks who Surly is, and Mammon explains that Surly is a "heretic" he brought with him to "convert." Subtle reminds Mammon that he must have honest intentions with the **philosopher's stone**. The process won't be successful if Mammon has ill intent, and it will be a shame to see all Subtle's hard work wasted. The stone must only be used for "public good, / To pious uses, and dear charity." If Mammon uses the stone for lustful means, Subtle warns, "So great and catholic a bliss," Mammon will be cursed.

The "red ferment" is a reference to one of the final stages of transmutation, after which "projection"—the turning of base metals into gold—is possible. Mammon is so greedy, he is concerned there won't be enough metal in all of London to satisfy his desire for gold. Face suggests that Mammon strip the metal from churches, just as the churches strip their "auditory," or congregates. This reference suggests that churches, too, are deceptive and swindle money out of worshippers.



*Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and this reference implies that Mammon is also lustful and wants the elixir of life to give him sexual strength and endurance—enough to have sex with 50 women each night. He also wants to line his room with mirrors to reflect his naked body as he walks through his "*succubae*," or prostitutes, which again speaks to his vice and lustfulness.*



According to legend, the philosopher's stone can only be used for the greater good, which is what Surly means by saying Subtle must "pious, holy, and religious" to work for the betterment of all society. Mammon is again gullible, as he believes Subtle is pure. This passage also underscores Mammon's own deception, as he feigns his own purity and pretends not to use "profane words" to get his hands on the stone.



Mammon's words again draw attention to religion, as he describes Surly as a "heretic," or nonbeliever, who must be "converted," or convinced of the power of alchemy. Subtle reiterates that the stone can only be used to good and "pious" ends, but he presumably knows that Mammon's intentions are "lustful" and rooted in greed and sex. This passage also reflects the anti-Catholic sentiments of the time, as Subtle claims lust is a catholic "bliss."



Mammon tells Subtle that he understands completely and doesn't need convincing. Surly, Mammon says, is whom Subtle must convince. Surly agrees; he does not believe in the **stone** and cannot be "gulled." Convincing Surly will be easy, Subtle says, because his work is nearly done. Face enters, and Subtle asks if he has looked at the "bolt's-head." Face answers he has, and Subtle asks what color it is. Face informs him it is white, so Subtle tells him to add vinegar, filter the water, and place it in a sand-bath for heating.

Face exits, and Surly comments sarcastically about Subtle's alchemical knowledge. Subtle claims in just three days of the "philosophers' wheel" he will have "Sulfur o' nature." Mammon immediately asks if the sulfur is his, and Subtle says Mammon has enough already. Mammon begins to protest, and Subtle accuses him of being covetous. Mammon promises to put it to good use and fund schools, hospitals, and the occasional church. Subtle claims he is not yet convinced Mammon's intentions are pure.

The process has been a success, Subtle says. Yes, Face confirms upon his return. "And," Face adds, "what was saved was put into the pelican / And signed with Hermes' seal." They should now "have a new amalgama," Subtle says. Surly again mutters an aside. "O, this ferret, Subtle says, "Is rank as any polecat." All they need now, Face says, is more metal to work with. Mammon immediately gives him money to buy more, which Subtle quickly takes. Subtle gives Face some more technical instructions, and Face exits to see to the laboratory.

Mammon turns to Subtle and asks when they plan to "make projection." Subtle tells Mammon to be patient. The **stone** is in a vapor bath, and Face must add the solution, let it congeal, and then dissolve it and let it congeal again. Afterward, it will turn any base metal to gold. Subtle tells Mammon to rush home and get all his brass, pewter, and andirons. Mammon asks if he may bring his spits, too, and his racks and pots and pans. Yes, Subtle says, they will transform it all. Surly interrupts. All of this, he says, is completely impossible.

Subtle explains there is "*Materia liquida*" (liquid matter) that is a form of gold not yet "*propria materia*" (a specific substance). If the liquid is dried, Subtle says, it becomes a **stone**; however, if it retains liquid, it becomes Sulphur or quicksilver—the "parents" of all metals. This is how mercury is created. All things in nature are born imperfect, Subtle says, and are made perfect later. Surly still isn't convinced. He believes that alchemy is "a pretty kind of game," like trick cards. Surly says that Subtle talks of medicine, mercury, and Sulphur, and his fancy words only serve to "obscure their art." They begin to bicker, and Mammon sees Doll enter. He stops and immediately asks who she is.

Jonson refers to Face and Subtle's victims as "gulls," meaning that they are gullible. Here, Surly claims he cannot be "gulled," or duped by Subtle's scam. A "bolt's-head" is the flask in which the alchemical process is completed, and the jargon and technical nature of Subtle and Face's words are part of their scam and efforts to convince Mammon and Surly that Subtle is really a skilled alchemist.



Subtle continues with his technical jargon. The "philosophers' wheel" refers to the alchemical process, and he claims he is close to creating "Sulfur o' nature," which is pure sulfur that when added to mercury was said to produce pure gold. Mammon again is greedy—he wants the stone and the sulfur—but Subtle calls him out on this.



Here, Face says the mixture produced by the alchemical process has been "put into the pelican" and "signed with Hermes' seal," which is to say the mixture has been hermetically sealed. The "new amalgama," or alchemical substance, brings them closer to the stone, Subtle says, but Surly still doesn't believe. To him, the "ferret" that is Face and Subtle's scam is "rank as any polecat," meaning it reeks of deception.



Mammon is greedy and is only interested in "projection," the act of turning metal to gold. Of course, Subtle doesn't have the philosopher's stone, and he can't make it, so he gives Mammon a detailed list of all the things he must do to before the stone can be made. This buys Subtle time and allows for him to extort more money and metal out of Mammon, which he can later sell and make even more money.



Subtle is still attempting to convince Surly of his alchemical knowledge through technical jargon—he even speaks Latin—but Surly is not convinced. Not only does Surly think Subtle is a con, he thinks alchemy in general is "a pretty kind of game," or nothing but a scam. Subtle's supposed knowledge is a distraction—smoke and mirrors to hide and "obscure their art"—which Surly suggests is evidence of deception, not genuine alchemy. Doll enters at just the right moment to stop their fighting, which suggests Doll knows she will catch lustful Mammon's eye.



Subtle ignores Mammon and orders Doll out of the room. He angrily calls to Face, who enters and tells Subtle that Doll only wishes to speak with him. Subtle leaves to go see her, and Face stays behind. He tells Mammon that Doll is the sister of a Lord. She is a “rare scholar,” Face says, and she went mad after studying the works of Broughton. Surly interrupts. This is “a bawdy house,” he says, nothing more. He begs Mammon not to be fooled. Do not “trust confederate knaves, and bawds and whores,” he says.

Face explains that Subtle is angry that Mammon saw Doll. Mammon gives Face more money and asks him what Doll is like when she isn't insane. Face claims she is very kind and agreeable. “She'll mount you up, like quick-silver,” he says, and she can speak of “state, / Of mathematics, bawdry, anything—” Mammon asks if she is available, and Face exits to find out. Surly can't believe Mammon has fallen for their scam. Doll is a prostitute, he says, but Mammon claims he saw Doll before in polite company. He even knows her brother, Mammon says. Surly doesn't believe him, but Mammon insists. He forgot, Mammon says, and is only now remembering.

Surly is still dubious, and Face enters the room. Face tells Surly that a man named “Captain Face” would like to meet him at the Temple Church in 30 minutes about some urgent business. Face then whispers to Mammon and tells him to return in two hours, after Subtle has had a chance to complete his work. Surly agrees to meet the Captain at the church; however, he says in an aside that he is not fooled. He knows this a “bawdy-house,” and if the law arrived, he would swear to it. Surly vows to get to the bottom of Face and Subtle's scam. Surly exits, and Mammon says he will follow shortly.

Face tells Mammon to hurry along with Surly, so he won't grow more suspicious. Mammon says he will, but first he wants Face to promise to talk to Doll for him. He wants Face to praise him and say that he is a gentleman. Face asks if he should mention the **stone**. Should he tell her that Mammon will make her rich like a queen, Face asks? Mammon is very excited. Yes, he says, telling Face he loves him. Face reminds Mammon to send his metal over, and Subtle can get busy “projecting.” Mammon gives Face more money and promises to hurry back.

Hugh Broughton was a Puritan Old Testament scholar, and in claiming Doll went mad while studying his works, Jonson implies that Broughton's radical religious argument is nonsense and maddening. Doll is a “rare scholar,” meaning Broughton's works are rarely studied, and this also paints his scholarship in a negative light. Surly suspects Subtle and Face are running a “bawdy house,” or brothel, and that Doll is a “whore,” but Mammon won't listen.



Face tries to sell Doll to Mammon by claiming she is agreeable, smart (she can talk about government or mathematics), and skilled sexually (“she'll mount you up, like quick-silver”), which speaks to Mammon's lustful nature. Face knows that Mammon will be interested in Doll, prostitute or not, and when Mammon behaves lustfully with her, it will be the perfect excuse to withhold the philosopher's stone—which they don't have and clearly can't make.



Since Face is “Captain Face,” he is clearly trying to get rid of Surly by sending him to a bogus meeting at a nearby church. Surly believes him and agrees to go, which suggests Surly is gullible despite his claims that he can't be duped. If Mammon returns in two hours without Surly, it is highly likely that Face and Subtle will be able to con even more money out of him.



Mammon's request for Face to put in a good word for him with Doll again reflects Mammon's lustfulness. Clearly, Face wants Mammon to bring him all his metal because Face plans to steal that too, which speaks both to Face's greed and his deceptive behavior.



ACT 2, SCENE 4

Subtle and Doll enter, and Subtle asks Face if Mammon took the bait. Face says Mammon has definitely taken the bait, and Subtle tells Doll that she must now pretend to be the sister of a lord. Doll says pretending will be no problem, and Subtle asks Face if Mammon is sending his metal. All of it, Face confirms and says he has also duped Surly into going to the Temple Church. There is a knock at the door, and Subtle says it must be the church elder who is coming to barter for Mammon's metal. Doll and Face exit, leaving Subtle behind. Subtle claims the "holy brethren / Of Amsterdam, the exiled saints" are searching for the **philosopher's stone**, too, and "hope / To raise their disciple by it."

Like Face and Subtle, Doll transforms into a different character with each new victim, which further suggests things and people are constantly changing and deceiving one another. The "holy brethren / Of Amsterdam" refers to Anabaptists, a group of radical Puritans known for their religious fanaticism, who were exiled from England to the Netherlands in the 1500s. The Anabaptists want the philosopher's stone so they can use the wealth it will bring to further their cause and their radical religious views.



ACT 2, SCENE 5

Ananias enters with Face, and Subtle immediately begins speaking to Face in alchemical jargon. He orders Face to "rectify [his] menstroe from the phlegma," "pour it o' the Sol," and let them "macerate together." Then, Subtle turns to Ananias and asks who he is. Ananias says he is a "faithful brother," and Subtle continues his technical language. Ananias claims not to understand "heathen language," and Subtle asks what he means by such a comment. "Heathen, you Knipperdollink?" Subtle asks. Ananias says that every language but Hebrew is "heathen." Subtle and Face exchange some more highly technical language, and Face exits.

Subtle's fancy jargon is again another attempt to pass himself off as an actual alchemist, but Ananias isn't impressed. Ananias claims to be a "faithful brother," or a member of the Anabaptists, and he proves himself to be a religious fanatic when he claims every language but Hebrew—the language spoken by Christ—is "heathen." Subtle refers to "Knipperdollink," an Anabaptist who tried to take over Münster, Germany, and implies Ananias is the real "heathen" precisely because he is an Anabaptist. Ironically, Ananias isn't speaking Hebrew either, which indicates he is hypocritical as well.



Ananias explains that he is a deacon of the "exiled brethren" and has been sent by his pastor, Tribulation Wholesome, to secure some metal goods. Subtle asks if Ananias has any money, and when Ananias says no, Subtle refuses to negotiate with him. Subtle will only talk with the pastor, he says, but Ananias says they will give him no more until they "see projection." They have already given Subtle 30 pounds for bricks and instruments, and another 90 pounds for materials. Subtle asks Ananias for his name, and when he gives it, Subtle kicks him out. "Out, the varlet / That cozened the Apostles!" Ananias exits, and Subtle sits smugly. The pastor is sure to come running now.

Ananias was a biblical figure in the New Testament who was struck dead after lying to God about money, and Subtle implies here that Jonson's Ananias is equally deceitful. Of course, it is Subtle who is deceiving Ananias and the other Anabaptists ("exiled brethren"), who have already given Subtle a substantial amount of money to create the philosopher's stone. Now, Ananias and the Anabaptists refuse to give any money until they see "projection"—the conversion of metal to gold.



ACT 2, SCENE 6

Face enters with Drugger, explaining that Subtle “is busy with his spirits.” They interrupt Subtle, who angrily asks them what they want. Face tells Drugger that he told him Subtle would be angry. He tells Drugger that they must “appease” Subtle, and then he asks Drugger for “a piece of gold to look on.” Subtle says he was just looking into Drugger’s future, which is very lucky. Drugger will be known and adored by all, Subtle claims. Drugger thanks Subtle and gives him a pipe of tobacco, and he tells Subtle about a rich young widow named Dame Pliant. The Dame would like her fortune read, too, Drugger says.

Face tells Drugger to bring Dame Pliant to them at once, and Subtle will tell her fortune, but Drugger says she is worried her visit will be found out by the public and hurt her chances at remarriage. Face promises Drugger that it will be better for the Dame to know her fortune, and, Face adds, he is sure it is a great one. She will have her pick of suitors, Face says, but Drugger claims the Dame’s brother, Kestrel, has said she must marry an aristocrat. Drugger says Kestrel is young and rich, and he has come to the city to “learn to quarrel, and to live by his wits.”

Face tells Drugger that Kestrel is in luck, because Subtle is the wittiest man in London. Subtle has a table of “mathematical demonstrations” concerning quarrels, and if Drugger brings both Kestrel and Dame Pliant, Subtle will teach Kestrel all about wit and quarreling. Drugger promises to try and convince them, and Subtle comments on the quality of his tobacco. As Face shows Drugger to the door, he suggests Drugger bring Subtle an entire pound of the tobacco. After Drugger exits, Face and Subtle argue over who will marry Dame Pliant. They agree to draw straws and promise not to tell Doll a thing, and Subtle tells Face to hurry down and meet Surly so he doesn’t become suspicious.

Drugger believes that Subtle is an expert in necromancy; hence, Face claims Subtle is “busy with his spirits,” meaning he is busy communing with the dead to tell Drugger’s fortune. Subtle isn’t communing with spirits, and he isn’t really angry at the interruption—he simply acts this way so Drugger will “appease” him with more “gold to look on.” Subtle is conning Drugger, since Drugger is gullible, he believes him.



Basically, Kestrel wants to intimidate people and be independently wealthy, presumably by bullying people out of money or cheating at cards. Kestrel sees his young, available sister as another way to make money and intends to marry her off to someone rich to increase his own wealth and status. While alchemy was seen as legitimate science, the mystic side of the practice was not, and Dame Pliant is worried she will gain a reputation for believing nonsense if she seen visiting a mystic alchemist.



Face basically tells Drugger that Subtle has witty fighting down to a science, or in this case, a “mathematical demonstration.” Face and Subtle’s immediate desire to marry Dame Pliant without even knowing her are obviously rooted in sex and money. She is young and rich, and in their greed, they fight over her, just as they do in the play’s first scene. They even resort to drawing straws again to settle their dispute, as they do earlier over Doll. They don’t tell Doll about Dame Pliant, which again points to the constant deception underpinning the action. What sort of relationship Doll has with Subtle and Face is never known; however, they are careful not to make her jealous, so they lie to her.



ACT 3, SCENE 1

Ananias enters with Tribulation Wholesome. Ananias complains that he doesn’t care for Subtle and thinks he is a “heathen,” and Tribulation agrees. He doesn’t much care for Subtle either, but he says they must “bend unto all means / That may give furtherance to the holy cause.” Plus, Tribulation says, Subtle can’t be more “antichristian” than the “bell-founders.” He says they must make an allowance for Subtle if they are to get the **philosopher’s stone**. The “silenced saints” will not be restored without the stone, Tribulation says. Ananias agrees and knocks on the door.

This scene again paints the Anabaptists in an unfavorable light. Tribulation thinks Subtle is a sinner—a “heathen” and “antichristian”—but he is willing to do business with him to get rich and further “the holy cause.” The Anabaptists are religious fanatics. They condemn Catholics (“bell-founders,” a reference to the bells in Catholic mass), and plan to promote their own radical religious beliefs with the wealth they will glean from the stone.



ACT 3, SCENE 2

Subtle enters and comments that “wicked Ananias” has returned. Tribulation apologizes and claims that Ananias has returned with good intentions. He says Ananias had no right to behave the way he did before, and they are ready to assist Subtle in any way necessary and give him as much money as he needs. Subtle says they have made the right decision. The **philosopher’s stone** is sure to further their cause. The elixir alone will be profitable, Subtle says. They can cure chronic conditions and make anyone young. They can cure lepers and take away pain, and Subtle says, they will be sure to have many friends.

Then Subtle reminds Tribulation that he will be able to turn his lawyer’s “pewter / To plate at Christmas,” but Ananias quickly corrects him. “Christ-tide, I pray you,” Ananias says. Anyone who turns metal to gold can’t help but have many friends, Subtle says again. The **philosopher’s stone** is a miracle he claims, “whose tradition / Is not from men, but spirits.” Ananias interrupts again. He despises traditions, he says. “They are Popish, all!” Tribulation again apologizes to Subtle. Ananias is but a “faithful brother,” Tribulation says and asks Subtle when the stone will be ready.

Subtle promises to have the philosopher’s stone ready in just 15 days, but for now, he can show Tribulation and Ananias how to melt pewter down to make Dutch dollars. Tribulation asks if such a thing is lawful, and Subtle claims it is “casting,” not “coining.” Tribulation promises to take the idea of the Dutch money to the brethren, who will decide if it is lawful. Suddenly, there is another knock at the door. Subtle tells Tribulation and Ananias they will speak again soon and shows them to the opposite door. Tribulation and Ananias exit, and Subtle yells to Face.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Face enters, and Subtle asks if he was successful. No, Face says. He walked the whole Temple Church and there was no signs of the “costive cheater.” Subtle is disappointed—to dupe Surly would be extremely satisfying. Face tells Subtle to forget Surly. He met a “Don of Spain” at the church, who has come to England “for his conscience.” He is rich and on his way over. Face told him all about Doll, and he is very interested. Face looks around for Doll. “She must prepare perfumes, delicate linen, / The bath in chief, a banquet, and her wit,” Face says. “For she must milk his epididymis.”

Again, Jonson adopts a sardonic tone when referring to Ananias (Subtle calls him “wicked”), and this is another veiled attack on Ananias’s religion. Tribulation is obviously trying to smooth things over after Ananias angered Subtle, which again reflects their gullibility. The Anabaptists truly believe that Subtle can make them the stone, and Subtle plays on both their religious beliefs and their greed.



Ananias’s preference for the word “Christ-tide” to “Christmas” again underscores his religious fanaticism and disapproval of Catholicism, as “Christmas” harkens to Catholic “mass.” Similarly, Ananias’s dislike of “traditions” is a reference to the Catholic practice of lending equal authority on tradition and Scripture. The only spiritual authority Protestants recognize is the Bible. Thus, traditions are “Popish”—a disparaging term for Catholic—to Ananias.



Subtle is himself trying to appease the Anabaptists and buy some time by offering to teach them to counterfeit money, which is illegal, whether it is “casting” or “coining.” The Anabaptists only recognize their own legal rulings, not those of society, so Tribulation must check with his brethren and decide if counterfeiting money is legal, or moral. Tribulation doesn’t instantly call the practice unlawful, which suggests the Anabaptists are quite flexible morally.



Face is obviously referring to Surly as the “costive cheater,” which is ironic since it is Face and Subtle who are cheating everyone. Spain is a Catholic country, which is why Face says the Spaniard came to England, a mostly Protestant country, “for his conscience.” Again, Doll is a prostitute, and Jonson is very descriptive in this respect, as Doll is expected to “milk [the Spaniard’s] epididymis.”



Subtle sends for Doll, and then he tells Face all about his “John Leidens.” He was able to get 100 marks from Ananias and Tribulation, Subtle says and exits. Face can’t believe how lucky he is. He took 10 pounds from Mammon and three from Dapper. That sum added to what he took from Drugger, plus whatever he manages to get from Dame Pliant and Kestrel—Face can’t imagine his share will be anything less than 40 pounds. Doll enters, and Face tells her about the Spaniard, and then he asks her if either Dapper or Drugger have returned. No, Doll answers.

Subtle returns and says Ananias and Tribulation are gone, and he has added their money to the bank. Subtle says he hopes Dame Pliant comes soon, but Face says he hopes everyone stays away until he finishes his business with the Spaniard. Subtle asks Face how he came to meet “this secret Don.” Face says he found him while looking for Surly, and then he tells Doll to “go tune [her] virginal.” She must give the Spaniard “good action, Face says. That way, he will be more easily “cozened.” There is a knock at the door. It is too early for the Spaniard, Face says.

Doll goes to the window. It is Dapper at the door, she says. In that case, Face says, it is time for Doll to be the “Queen of Fairy.” Doll agrees and exits. Face tells Subtle to put on his robes and follow his cues. Face looks out the window and notices a second man. It must be Kestrel, Face says, the man who wants to quarrel. Dame Pliant, Subtle says, isn’t with them.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Dapper enters, and Face tells him that Subtle is inside. Although it was difficult, Face says, he has convinced Subtle to give Dapper the “familiar.” Suddenly, Drugger enters with Kestrel. Kestrel has come to see Subtle, and Drugger has more tobacco for Subtle, too. Face asks where Dame Pliant is, and Drugger promises she will be along soon. Kestrel asks where the doctor is; Drugger has told him all about his skills. Face tells Kestrel that Subtle can teach him all about quarrelling and wits, and he can teach him to be successful at cards and gaming.

Subtle’s mention of Ananias and Tribulation as “John Leidens” refers to the Anabaptists followers of Johann Buckholdt of Leiden, who was the leader of a radical group of Puritans in Germany. Face stops and takes stock of all the money he has conned out of his victims thus far, which again underscores his greed and deception.



Again, Jonson draws attention to Doll’s job as a prostitute, as she must “tune [her] virginal” and give the Spaniard “good action,” so they can steal all his money. This again underscores their deception and, in bluntly and repeatedly referencing sex that society considers inappropriate, implies that this kind of behavior is far more common than people would like to think.



This passage again underscores the character transformation that takes place in the play. Upon Dapper’s arrival, Doll, Subtle, and Face must transform into completely different people, and they must maintain these identities with Kestrel and Dame Pliant, too.



Kestrel doesn’t initially bring Dame Pliant with him, which suggests he is potentially checking out Subtle and Face as potential matches for his sister. Subtle has Drugger, and now Kestrel, so conned, that they bring him tobacco and women. They are both gullible, and since they believe they can get something from Subtle, they will give him whatever they have to get it.



Face points to Dapper as an example for Kestrel. Dapper will soon meet with Subtle and be “initiated,” and afterward, he will have nothing but luck and be rich within two weeks. Kestrel can’t believe it and asks Face if he is tricking him. Absolutely not, Face says, swearing on his life. Kestrel asks if the doctor will teach him such things, and Face says he can do more than that. Subtle can conjure “familiars” to give Kestrel an edge. Kestrel asks if Subtle is really that powerful, and Druggier promises he is. Druggier once had a headache and Subtle sent him to see a woman, and she cured it. Kestrel says he must send his sister, Dame Pliant, to meet the good doctor.

Kestrel tells Druggier to go and fetch Dame Pliant, but Face informs Kestrel that Subtle is busy right now. He suggests Kestrel go with Druggier to get Dame Pliant and come back; Subtle will be done with his business by then. Kestrel agrees and leaves with Druggier. Then, Face turns to Dapper and asks him if he has performed the ceremony as directed. Yes, Dapper confirms, and he put on a clean shirt. Dapper gives Face more money, and Subtle enters.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

Subtle enters disguised as a “Priest of Fairy.” He asks if Dapper is fasting and if he performed the ceremony as directed. Dapper confirms he has, and Subtle says that Dapper must wear a special petticoat to meet the “Fairy Queen.” Dapper agrees, and Subtle and Face dress him in a petticoat and blindfold him with a rag. They insist he must empty his pockets, as he can have nothing of value when he meets the Fairy Queen. Dapper begins throwing out all his money, as well as his jewelry and rings, and Doll enters playing a cittern.

Face tells a blindfolded Dapper that the Fairy Queen’s elves have arrived. Face says the Queen’s elves have come to pinch Dapper until he has given up all his money, and then Face, Doll, and Subtle begin pinching him all over. They chant “Ti ti, ti ti to ta” as they pinch him, and he finally admits to a half-crown of gold around his wrist. Suddenly, Doll goes to the window and looks out. Sir Epicure Mammon is at the door, she says. Subtle and Face panic; they cannot send Mammon away.

Subtle tells Dapper that he will soon meet the Fairy Queen, but she is taking her dinner just now; however, she has sent Dapper a dead mouse and a piece of gingerbread from her plate. Subtle stuffs a large piece of gingerbread into Dapper’s mouth and gags him with a rag, then he looks to Face and Doll. Subtle asks where they should put Dapper; he can’t be seen or heard while Doll entertains Mammon. Doll suggests they lock him in the privy, so they shove him in the bathroom and return to the front door, where Face happily greets Mammon.

Face is completely conning Kestrel and Dapper here. Dapper will soon be “initiated,” which means he is about to meet the Fairy Queen and have his familiar blessed, and Face implies that Subtle can do the same for Kestrel. This offer certainly appeals to Kestrel’s greed, and it has him thinking that Subtle may be the better match for Dame Pliant.



Again, Dapper is exceedingly gullible and has completed the silly ceremony with the vinegar. Subtle isn’t really busy, Face just wants Kestrel and Druggier to believe he is, so they are free to work their Fairy Queen con on Dapper. Multiple victims showing up at once complicate Face and Subtle’s plans, and this happens more and more as the play progresses.



This scene proves how truly gullible Dapper is, as he believes Face and Subtle when they claim he must wear a petticoat to meet the Fairy Queen. Dapper is so gullible and intent on riches that he is willing to humiliate himself just to get his “familiar” and win at cards and gambling. Of course, this all just a diversion so they can rob Dapper.



Dapper easily believes that he is being shaken down by elves, which again proves his gullibility and willingness to believe anything. Face and Subtle panic at Mammon’s arrival because they obviously can’t pull off two scams at once, and they don’t want to give up the money they might be able to con out of Mammon by sending him away.



Again, it is completely ridiculous that Dapper believes what is happening to him. Subtle’s explanation is ridiculous, as is gagging Dapper with rag and a cookie, but Dapper completely falls for it. Jonson’s play is a satire and comedy, and Face, Subtle, and Doll gagging Dapper and shoving him in the bathroom is very funny.



ACT 4, SCENE 1

Mammon enters and immediately asks where Subtle is. Face tells Mammon that Subtle is busy bringing forth “projection,” after which he will begin transforming Mammon’s metal. “Into gold?” Mammon asks. Yes, Face confirms, into gold *and* silver. Mammon says he is only concerned with gold and wants no silver, but Face suggests he give a little to the poor. Mammon asks where Doll is, and Face says she will be along shortly. He has told Doll the most wonderful things about Mammon, Face says; however, Mammon must not mention “divinity” in her company “For fear of putting her in a rage.”

Face reminds Mammon that he must be very quiet in his visit with Doll. If Subtle senses Mammon is behaving in a lustful way, he will never agree to give him the **philosopher’s stone**. Mammon may talk to Doll about mathematics or poetry—they can even talk “bawdry”—but “no word of controversy,” Face reminds him. Face exits to fetch Doll, leaving Mammon alone. Mammon readies himself to meet Doll. He will “talk to her, all in gold,” Mammon says. He will have the stone soon enough, and when he does, Doll “shall feel gold, taste gold, hear gold, [and] sleep gold”

Face returns with Doll, and Mammon bows to kiss her hem, but she stops him. Instead, Doll brings her lips to Mammon’s and kisses him. Face exits. Mammon instantly takes to flattering Doll, talking about her “breeding” and “blood,” but Doll claims she is but the daughter of a poor baron. “Sweet madam,” Mammon says to Doll, “let me be particular—.” Doll interrupts. “Particular, sir? I pray you, know your distance,” she says.

Mammon continues sweet talking Doll and asks her how she spends her time, living in a house with such a “rare man.” Doll says she passes the time studying mathematics and “distillation,” and Mammon remarks that it must be wonderful to study under such a “divine instructor.” Doll says it is wonderful and tells Mammon that she is interested in all natural disciplines. It is a shame, Mammon says, that Doll should live like a shut-in, studying all the while, as if she is a nun. Mammon is surprised Doll’s brother permits it, and he claims that if he was her brother, he would lavish her with diamonds. He says Doll herself is like a diamond—“created” for the “light”—and he takes off his diamond ring and gives it to her.

Mammon again is greedy and not at all concerned with the greater good. He only wants gold and doesn’t plan to turn anything to silver. Mammon is also lustful, which is why he immediately asks about Doll. Jonson again draws attention to religion and condemns radical Puritans, as Face warns Mammon not to speak of “divinity,” or religion. Mammon believes Doll is mad from reading a Puritan scholar, and now the mere mention of religion drives her into a fit.



Mammon is again greedy, as he thinks only of gold, and he plans to use the stone to impress Doll and seduce her. Since the stone must be put to pious means, it can only be held by pious people. If Mammon has inappropriate sex with Doll, he won’t be deserving of the stone, which is why Face tells Mammon he must be quiet. Face reminds Mammon that he can talk about anything—even “bawdry,” or sex—but no “controversy” (religion).



Mammon thinks Doll is an aristocrat, which is why he talks of her “breeding” and “blood.” Jonson again uses the word “particular” as code for sex. Mammon and Doll don’t know each other, but they are completely open to sex, which Jonson suggests is more common in society than it may seem.



Mammon means Subtle when he says Doll lives with a “rare man” and “divine instructor,” and Doll implies that Subtle teaches her alchemy, or “distillation.” Mammon’s claim that Doll is a diamond “created” for the “light” harkens to the transformative powers of alchemy and its ability to create new substances. Mammon’s description of the “light” also harkens to religion, as does his comparison of Doll to a nun, which, since Doll is a prostitute, is highly ironic.



Mammon tells Doll that he is “the lord of the **philosopher’s stone**,” and she is “the lady.” Doll feigns shock and asks if Mammon really has the stone. He says Subtle is busy “at projection” now, and the stone will soon be in his possession. He tells Doll that living like a recluse in the Friars is no place for her, and he will take her to live the most luxurious life of unimagined wealth. Doll asks Mammon what he will do when the prince finds out about the stone; the prince is sure to notice and take the stone for himself. Not if he doesn’t know, Mammon says. Doll warns him to be careful—he could end up dying in a prison cell.

Mammon tells Doll they will take the **stone** and run away to a “free state,” where they will live together and “enjoy a perpetuity / Of life and lust.” Suddenly, Face enters. They are much too loud, he says. Their talk can be heard all the way in the laboratory, so Face suggests they go to a more private place, like the garden or a room upstairs. “Excellent! Lungs,” Mammon says to Face, handing him more money. “There’s for thee.” Face thanks him and reminds him again not to speak of religion. Mammon and Doll exit, and Face yells to Subtle.

Obviously, Mammon doesn't have pure intentions when it comes to stone, and he is trying to deceive Subtle and make him believe he does. Clearly, Mammon doesn't plan to use the stone for the good of society; he plans to hide the stone from society and use it to make himself rich and impress women so he can have sex with them. Mammon is lustful and greedy, and his interaction with Doll reflects this.



Here, Mammon suggests he and Doll take the stone to a “free state,” to a republic like Venice, where they can freely live a life of wealth and “lust.” Just as Doll, Face, and Subtle suspect, Mammon jumps at the chance to spend time in private with Doll. He even gives Face more money, which they also hoped for. In this way, Mammon’s lust is a double win for Subtle and Face—it gives them an excuse not to give him the stone and it gets them even more money.



ACT 4, SCENE 2

Subtle enters and, after a hearty laugh with Face, tells him that Dame Pliant and her brother, Kestrel, have arrived. Face says he must hurry into his captain’s disguise, but first they must decide who gets Dame Pliant. They decide to draw straws later, and Subtle orders Face to the door. As Face goes to the door, he complains that Subtle will get to kiss Dame Pliant first because Face has to get in his disguise. As an aside, Subtle admits he will kiss her, “and perhaps hit [Face] through both the nostrils.”

Face opens the door, and Kestrel and Dame Pliant enter. Kestrel asks Face where the Captain is, and Face says he will be along shortly. For now, Face says, the Captain’s associate, the “Doctor,” is ready to receive them. Face exits, and Subtle immediately tells Kestrel that he knows all about quarreling and living by one’s wits. Kestrel asks if Subtle will teach him. Subtle agrees but says he must first greet Dame Pliant. Subtle calls Dame Pliant his “soft and buxom widow” and kisses her.

Subtle’s comment that he will “perhaps hit [Face] through both the nostrils” refers to a bull with a ring in its nose that allows a farmer to lead it around. This analogy reflects Subtle’s deceptive intentions. Subtle is deceiving Kestrel and Dame Pliant, but he is also deceiving Face, and he plans to metaphorically lead Face around by the nose.



Kestrel has already met Face disguised as a captain, but Kestrel is so gullible that he doesn’t see through him. Subtle is obviously coming on to Dame Pliant—he kisses her and calls her his “soft buxom widow”—even though he hasn’t yet drawn straws with Face, which further underscores Subtle’s deceptive intent.



Kestrel asks if Subtle can tell Dame Pliant's fortune, and Subtle confirms he can. He can tell her fortune by reading her forehead, Subtle says, and by her lips, "which must be tasted." He kisses her again and asks to see her hand. Studying Dame Pliant's palm, Subtle tells her she will become "a lady." Dame Pliant looks excitedly to Kestrel. "He's a rare man, believe me!" she says, but Kestrel tells her to be patient. There is another man coming, he says. Face enters, wearing the captain's disguise.

Face greets Kestrel and asks about Dame Pliant. Kestrel introduces them and tells Face he must kiss her, so he does. Subtle quietly informs Face that the Spaniard has arrived and is at the door. Face must distract him for a bit, until Subtle can get Kestrel and Dame Pliant out of the room. Face asks Subtle what he will do with them, and Subtle says he will distract them with books and "dark glass." Face exits, commenting that he will have Dame Pliant, and Subtle shows Kestrel and Dame Pliant to his laboratory, where he will teach Kestrel to quarrel and "look in a glass" for Dame Pliant.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

Face enters and says he must have Dame Pliant at any cost. Subtle enters, too, and says he has distracted Dame Pliant and Kestrel. Face immediately repeats that he must have Dame Pliant, but Face tells him to be quiet, so Doll doesn't hear, and they begin again to argue. Subtle again says that Doll will hear their argument and orders Face to open the door. He does, and Surly enters, disguised as a Spaniard. Surly greets them in Spanish and pretends not to understand English.

Face and Subtle begin to insult Surly, calling him fat, and they openly admit that they plan to con and rob him. Surly will be "emptied," Subtle says, "pumped and drawn / Dry, as they say." Surly continues speaking to them in Spanish, and Subtle asks Face what Surly is talking about. Suddenly, Face remembers. The Spaniard has come to see Doll, he says, but she is decidedly busy. They begin to panic. Subtle asks what they are going to do; he doesn't want to let the Spaniard go.

Face suggests Subtle tell Dame Pliant her fortune and tell her the Spaniard is her aristocrat, but Subtle resists. He doesn't want to give up Dame Pliant to the Spaniard, but Face asks him to reconsider and think about Doll. Subtle agrees and they shake hands. Face exits, and Subtle turns to Surly. Surly is about to be "soaked, and stroked, and tubbed, and rubbed," Subtle says, leading him from the room.

Subtle again references "metoposcopy," the telling of fortunes by reading the forehead, but his attention to Dame Pliant's lips is just a ploy to kiss her and further seduce her. He promises that she will soon be "a lady," or the wife of an aristocrat, and Subtle implies he is that aristocrat (a "rare man"). But Kestrel wants her to be patient because he thinks Face is an aristocrat, too.



Kestrel and Dame Pliant don't seem to notice that "Captain Face" is the same man who greeted them at the door, which again highlights their gullibility. Subtle plans to distract Kestrel and Dame Pliant with "dark glass," or a crystal ball. He will "look in a glass" and tell Dame Pliant's fortune and continue their con with Kestrel while Face sees to the Spaniard, who has also come to have sex with Doll.



Subtle is again worried that Doll will find out about Dame Pliant, which further suggests they aren't being honest with Doll either. Face and Subtle are both lustful and greedy and want the rich and beautiful widow for themselves, and they are willing to deceive each other and Doll just to get her. Ironically, Surly is deceiving Subtle and Face as well, and they are none the wiser, which implies Face and Subtle are gullible, too.



Just like with Mammon, if Subtle and Face turn the Spaniard away, they won't be able to scam any money out of him, and, according to Subtle, they plan to rob him "dry" and take everything he has. Because of their insatiable greed, Face and Subtle have so many cons going at once that they can't keep them straight.



Subtle says Surly will be "stroked, and tubbed, and rubbed," which means he just assumes Dame Pliant will have sex with the Spaniard. This assumption again implies that inappropriate sex is a common vice in society, even if people don't openly talk about it the way Jonson's characters do.



ACT 4, SCENE 4

Face enters with Kestrel and Dame Pliant. Face is telling Kestrel all about Subtle's fortune and says Dame Pliant will soon become a Spanish countess. Dame Pliant asks if a Spanish countess is better than an English countess, and Kestrel tells Face to ignore her. "She is a fool," Kestrel says. Face reassures them a Spanish countess is best. Ask anyone, Face says, and they will say that Spanish horses are best, as well as Spanish clothing and Spanish beards, and Spanish steps form the best dances.

Subtle enters, holding Dame Pliant's horoscope, and begins to tell her fortune. Face interrupts. He has already told her, Face says, and Dame Pliant knows that she will become a Spanish countess. Subtle says Face can never keep a secret, but the Dame says she wouldn't like to marry a Spanish count. She doesn't like the Spanish. "Never sin' eighty-eight could I abide 'em," she says, even though she wasn't born until three years later. Kestrel turns to his sister. "God's lid, you shall love him," Kestrel says, "or I'll kick you." Dame Pliant promises she will. If she doesn't, Kestrel says, he will "maul" her.

Surly enters, still disguised as a Spanish count, and Face welcomes him warmly. Surly begins speaking to them in Spanish, and Kestrel notes he isn't speaking English. He asks Face if the Count is speaking French, and Face says it is Spanish. He tells Kestrel that the Count is fond of Dame Pliant, but it is custom in Spain for the woman to first advance and kiss the man. Kestrel orders Dame Pliant to kiss the Count, or he will "thrust a pin i' [her] buttocks, and Face suggests they go out to the garden. He can translate, Face says, and Dame Pliant exits with Surly. Subtle quietly tells Face to get word to Doll, and then he tells Kestrel to come with him. They will finish his quarreling lesson, Subtle says.

ACT 4, SCENE 5

Doll enters, in a "fit," and Mammon follows close behind. Doll is talking frantically. "Perdiccas and Antigonus were slain," she says, and that left only "Seleuc' and Ptolemy." Mammon tries to interrupt her and stop her incessant talking, but Doll keeps rambling. "We all the Rabbins, and the heathen Greeks," she says. Face enters and asks Mammon what is wrong. He tells Face that Doll is "in a fit," and Face feigns shock and fear. Subtle is sure to hear her rantings, Face says, and he asks Mammon how Doll became so undone. Mammon says he talked about the "fifth monarchy," and Doll went on about the other four. "Out of Broughton!" Face cries.

Face is clearly trying to convince Kestrel and Dame Pliant that Spanish counts are best because they need her to agree to marry the Spaniard to pull their scam off and still set the Spaniard up with a woman. Kestrel is cruel and refers to his sister as "a fool." He sees her only as a means to satisfy his own greed—in this case, his desire for increased wealth and upward social mobility.



Subtle seems irritated that Face has already told Dame Pliant her fortune, which reflects the growing animosity between Face and Subtle. Dame Pliant refers to 1588—the year the Spanish Armada invaded England—which she cites as her reason for not liking the Spanish. Regardless of how Dame Pliant feels, Kestrel forces her to love the Spaniard—if not, Kestrel will beat ("kick" and "maul") her.



Kestrel doesn't seem to be very smart, which allows Jonson to satirize him more easily. Kestrel states the obvious (Surly isn't speaking English) and asks if Surly is speaking French knowing that he is a Spaniard. This implied stupidity also makes it easier for Face and Subtle to dupe Kestrel. Kestrel again threatens Dame Pliant with physical violence if she doesn't agree to marry and, presumably, have sex with the Spaniard right now.



The "fifth monarchy" is the monarchy of Christ, which, along with Face's mention of Broughton (a Puritan scholar), means that Mammon mentioned religion to Doll and she is pretending to go completely insane. Doll's frantic talking in the throes of her "fit" doesn't seem to make much sense, but she is citing Hugh Broughton's religious text, A Conent of Scripture. Doll's feigned insanity again implies that Puritan beliefs are nonsense.



The sound of Subtle's voice can be heard in the next room, and Face grabs Doll and runs off. Mammon asks where he should hide just as Subtle enters. He asks what is going on, and Mammon swears there was "no unchaste purpose." Subtle isn't convinced. Why else would Mammon try to hide, he asks? Subtle says that Mammon is guilty because he has undoubtedly behaved lustfully with Doll, which will set back their work by a month at least. Suddenly, Face enters in a panic. The **philosopher's stone**, he says, has exploded in flames.

There is a knock at the door, and Face tells Subtle and Mammon it is Doll's brother, and he is angry that she has been driven into a fit. Mammon asks Face if the **stone** is really lost, and Face confirms there is little left. Mammon curses his punishment, but, he says, he has sinned. Mammon says it is time he go, and Face agrees it is indeed a good idea for Mammon to atone at home. Mammon asks Face again if he is sure that the stone is lost, and Face says there is very little to be salvaged. Face tells Mammon he will contact him if anything can be saved and closes the door behind him. Face turns to Subtle. On to the Spaniard, Face says.

ACT 4, SCENE 6

Surly enters with Dame Pliant. He tells her, now speaking in English, that she has fallen into a "nest of villains." But, Surly says, he is a gentleman and the Dame is a beautiful woman, and he is still very interested in her. He is poor, but she is rich, and her wealth will make him a man—if she will have him. Dame Pliant says she will, and Surly promises to handle Face and Subtle.

Subtle enters, thinking Surly is still a Spaniard, and asks how he is fairing with Dame Pliant. Subtle continues talking and begins picking Surly's pockets as he does. Surly tells Subtle, in English this time, to stand up. Subtle begins to scream murder, but Surly says he has no such intent. "I am the Spanish Don," Surly says, and he knows they have tried to trick him.

ACT 4, SCENE 7

Face enters with Kestrel, and, pointing him in the direction of Surly, tells Kestrel it is now his chance to quarrel. Kestrel is up to the challenge and quickly takes to insulting Surly. Face tells Kestrel that Surly has come to cheat Subtle, and Surly tries to explain himself. He even asks Dame Pliant to talk some sense into her brother, but Kestrel won't listen. Kestrel tells Dame Pliant to leave at once, and Dame Pliant obeys her brother without complaint. Just as Surly begins to tell Kestrel all about Face and Subtle's scam, Druggier enters.

Mammon lies and claims there was "no unchaste purpose" in his meeting with Doll, which isn't true since it's implied that they just had sex. Mammon tries to deceive Subtle, but Subtle banks on Mammon being lustful and greedy. Now, Subtle can claim the stone won't form because Mammon's sin will set back Subtle's work, and in this case, cause the stone to burst into flames.



Doll doesn't have a brother, at least she isn't said to elsewhere in the play, and so it is likely Doll herself who is knocking on the door. Claiming Doll's brother is at the door and angry gives Face a reason to rush Mammon out. Mammon openly admits that his lust caused the stone to self-destruct, so there is little reason for him to stay. Without Mammon in the way, Face and Subtle are free to move on to conning the Spaniard.



Alone with Dame Pliant, Surly rats out Subtle and Face, but Surly is still greedy. Dame Pliant is rich, and he hopes to marry her to get her money. Dame Pliant is, as her name suggests, flexible, and she agrees to marry him anyway.



Again, Subtle picking Surly's pockets is ridiculous and very comical. Subtle has been so duped by Surly, he doesn't recognize him even after Surly removes his disguise.



Face encourages Kestrel to test out his fighting skills on Surly so Face and Subtle can get rid of Surly and try to salvage their scam. Again, as tension mounts and the play builds toward the climax, Face and Subtle must deal with multiple victims at once and try to juggle each of their individual cons and disguises at the same time.



Face quietly tells Drugger to follow his lead and says that Surly has scammed the “honest Drugger” out of money and tobacco. It is true, Drugger says, and Surly has promised three times to pay. Surly protests, but Face continues. He asks Drugger if Surly owes him for “lotium,” and Drugger confirms he does, in addition to “six syringes.” Face quietly tells Kestrel he must quarrel Surly right out the door, so Kestrel continues insulting and threatening him.

Suddenly, Ananias enters and tells Face that the brethren have concluded that casting dollars is lawful. Subtle tells Ananias to be quiet, and Kestrel asks if Ananias is a constable. Face assures Kestrel that Ananias is no constable, and Ananias instantly notices Surly’s Spanish clothing. Ananias says the Spanish “are profane, / Lewd, superstitious, and idolatrous breeches,” and Kestrel kicks Surly out of the house. Surly rushes out the door, and Face tells Kestrel to chase Surly down the street, so he doesn’t come back. Kestrel agrees and exits.

Face explains to Drugger that Surly has kept them from most of their business, and he asks Drugger if he can get his hands on a Spanish suit. “Hast thou no credit with the players?” Face asks. “Yes, sir,” Drugger says, “did you ever see me play the fool.” Face says he hasn’t, and then he says that “Hieronimo’s old cloak” will do just fine. Drugger exits, and Ananias says again that casting money has been deemed lawful. Fine, says Subtle, but they cannot do it here. If they are caught, Subtle says, they will all be go to prison. Ananias exits, and Doll enters.

Doll is in a panic and says they are all caught. Face’s master, Lovewit, is back from the country and is just outside. Face and Subtle are shocked and equally panicked. Face tells them both to calm down. He orders Subtle and Doll to pack up all their profits and stash them in the basement. They should run down to the docks, and Face will meet up with them later and bring their profits. But first, Face must become “Jeremy the butler” again and shave off his beard.

Here, Face uses Drugger to further deceive Kestrel and make him believe that Surly is the real con. This entire scenario is incredibly far-fetched, but Kestrel and Drugger, of course, are gullible, and they fall for it easily enough. They mock Surly and claim he owes Drugger for “lotium” (hair tonic made from urine) and “six syringes,” which implies Surly also has a problem with drugs, likely laudanum (a type of opium).



Subtle and Face’s scam is obviously starting to unravel. This section also reflects the strong anti-Catholic sentiments of Jonson’s time, and it further implies that the Anabaptists are immoral, since they have no problem counterfeiting money. Ananias assumes by Surly’s Spanish clothing that he is Catholic, and Ananias quickly takes to insulting him and implying he is unchristian simply because he doesn’t look Protestant.



Face still has to convince Dame Pliant and Kestrel that someone is Spanish if he is to pull off his scam, which is why he asks Drugger for a Spanish suit. Face asks Drugger if he knows any actors, or “players,” with costumes, such as “Hieronimo’s old cloak” from [The Spanish Tragedy](#) (Jonson himself played Hieronimo in Thomas Kyd’s play). When Drugger says yes and asks if Face saw him “play the fool,” this is a bit of theater humor for Jonson’s contemporaries. The actor who was first cast to play Drugger also played the Fool in a recent production of Shakespeare’s [King Lear](#).



Face again transforms into another character upon Lovewit’s arrival. Presumably, “Jeremy the butler” is Face’s “real” identity, and his identity as Face (a name that also gestures to his ability to disguise himself and take on different faces or identities) is just for criminal purposes.



ACT 5, SCENE 1

Lovewit enters with several neighbors, who are telling him there has been a steady stream of people coming and going from his house since he left for the country. Lovewit says it is strange that his butler should let so many people into his house, and he begins to worry that he has been robbed. He asks the neighbors if anyone has seen his butler, Jeremy, but they all say they have not seen him in several weeks. Lovewit knocks, but Jeremy does not come to the door. He hears a scream from inside, and the neighbors tell him to knock again before breaking down the door.

Face's neighbors appear to be just as gullible as his victims, as they failed to recognize him as Jeremy once he grew a beard and transformed into Face. In this way, Face deceives his victims, Lovewit, and his neighbors. This widespread deception reflects the widespread deception present in broader society, which, Jonson argues, puts everyone at risk of being tricked in one way or another.

**ACT 5, SCENE 2**

Lovewit knocks on the door again, and Face answers as Jeremy the butler, his face shaved clean. "O, here's Jeremy," the neighbors say. Lovewit asks Face where he has been and what is going on. Face tells Lovewit that the house was hit with the plague. Weeks ago, he noticed the cat displaying symptoms and thought it best to close up the house. He locked up and left, and he has only just returned. But, Lovewit says, the neighbors witnessed many men and women coming and going these past few weeks. Face insists that he was gone and asks the neighbors if they saw him recently. No, they say, and Jeremy "is a very honest fellow."

Again, Lovewit's neighbors are extremely gullible and don't recognize him at all. Jeremy, of course, is not "a very honest fellow." It may seem like a sick cat is far-fetched and Lovewit is just as gullible; however, the plague was carried by fleas and rodents, so it is certainly plausible that a cat could come down with the plague and potentially infect the whole house if not quarantined.

**ACT 5, SCENE 3**

Surly and Mammon knock on the door, shouting that Face and Subtle are "Rogues, / Cozeners, impostors, [and] bawds!" Face answers the door and asks what they want. Mammon says they would like to come in, but Face says it is strange that they should want to enter another man's house. Face points to Lovewit and says he is the owner. Mammon asks Lovewit where the "cheaters" are, and Face informs them that Lovewit is just returning from the country. The neighbors identify Surly and Mammon as two of the men they saw entering the house in Lovewit's absence. Face refuses to let Surly and Mammon in, and they promise to return with a warrant.

Surly and Mammon don't seem to recognize Face as Jeremy either, which again speaks to their gullibility. Mammon obviously now believes that Face and Subtle are comen ("Rogues, / Cozeners, imposters"), and he wants justice. Face again must rely on deception, only this time he must con Lovewit into believing he has no idea what is going on and has been away, like Lovewit, to avoid the plague.



Lovewit again asks Face what is going on, and Kestrel knocks on the door. Kestrel threatens to call the police, and Face asks him who he is looking for. Kestrel says he is looking for the "bawdy Doctor, and the cozening Captain," as well as his sister, Dame Pliant. Lovewit again looks to Face for an explanation, but Face swears he has been gone for weeks. Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome begin knocking on the door, too, and when they can't get inside, they exit with Kestrel to go fetch the police.

Again, no one seems to recognize Face as Jeremy the butler, which speaks to their gullibility and Face's ability to successfully deceive people. Dame Pliant is still in the house, as are Subtle and Doll, and Face must think fast to shuffle all his scams, which are quickly unraveling.



“The world’s turned to Bedlam,” Lovewit says. The neighbors tell Lovewit that each of the men who came to the door have visited the house in the last few weeks, and Face again swears he was gone. Suddenly, Dapper cries out from the next room. Face forgot all about Dapper, and he tells Lovewit he has no idea who the man is. Dapper can be heard asking Subtle about the Fairy Queen, and Lovewit looks to Face and demands the truth.

“What shall I do?” Face asks. “I am caught.” Lovewit asks the neighbors to leave, and Face begs Lovewit not to discipline him. Face admits he has been using Lovewit’s house for the last few weeks, but if Lovewit promises not to punish him, Face will make it worth his while. “I’ll help you to a widow,” Face says to Lovewit, thinking of Dame Pliant. “Will make you seven years younger, and a rich one.” Face asks for Lovewit’s forgiveness, and Lovewit asks to see the widow.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

Subtle and Dapper enter, and Subtle asks Dapper if he has eaten through his gag. Yes, Dapper says, it crumbled in his mouth. Subtle tells Dapper that he has ruined his chances to please the Fairy Queen, but Dapper begs to meet her and ask her forgiveness. Face enters and talks with Subtle off to the side. Face says he will send Doll in as the Fairy Queen, and then they will get rid of Dapper. Face exits, and Subtle tells Dapper the Fairy Queen will see him after all.

Doll enters dressed as the Fairy Queen, and Subtle orders Dapper to kneel before her. Doll tells Dapper to stand, and Subtle orders him to kiss the hem of Doll’s dress. Doll gives Dapper a bird with instructions to “Open a vein, with a pin” once a week, and he will find good luck with the games. Dapper promises to do just as Doll says, and she tells him to come back and see her. She promises to give him “three or four hundred chests of treasure, / And some twelve thousand acres of Fairyland.” Dapper agrees and exits.

Face returns and tells Subtle that Drugger is at the door. He tells Subtle to go and get Drugger’s suit, and then he asks Doll if she is all packed. She says she is, and Subtle returns with Hieronimo’s cloak. Face takes the cloak and exits, and Subtle asks Doll if she has “gulled” Lady Pliant out of her jewelry. Doll says she hasn’t yet, but she will. Subtle tells Doll that they will leave for the docks tonight and finally be rid of Face. Doll is happy. She has grown tired of Face, she says. Doll and Subtle kiss, and Face returns.

“Bedlam” is a reference to the psychiatric hospital in London, and with this comment, Lovewit implies that everyone has gone insane. Face is clearly caught, and he has no choice but to tell Lovewit the truth.



Face is caught, and he is hoping Dame Pliant will get him out of trouble. Lovewit proves to be just as greedy and lustful as the rest of them, as he immediately jumps at the chance to marry a rich, young woman. Nearly everyone in Jonson’s play is greedy and lustful, and, Jonson thus implies, broader society is as well.



Even after Dapper has been robed, forced to wear a petticoat, gaged, bound, and shoved in a bathroom, he still wants to meet the Fairy Queen, which suggests that Dapper is both very gullible and very greedy and determined to get his hands on a “familiar” so he can cheat at cards.



Dapper’s gullibility seems endless. He easily believes that torturing a bird will bring him luck, and he believes that Doll is the “Fairy Queen” and has the magical authority to gift him treasure and part of Fairyland. Jonson is clearly being sarcastic here, but he seems to imply nonetheless that broader society is at risk of being duped by charlatan alchemists like Subtle who promise magic in exchange for money.



Clearly, Subtle and Doll have a secret relationship and have been planning to deceive Face all along. This secret relationship also explains why Subtle did not want Doll to know that he was lusting after Dame Pliant. Even though they are caught and have to run, Doll still plans to rob Lady Pliant, which again speaks to the insatiability of Doll and Subtle’s greed.



Face asks again if they are all packed, and Subtle reassures him they are. Face asks where the money is, and Subtle tells him it is packed safely in the trunks. Face tells Subtle and Doll that Lovewit knows all about their scams and has promised not to punish him. Suddenly, there is another knock at the door, and they hear the police shout from outside. Face turns to Doll and Subtle and tells them there is no time for the trunks. They must leave now, Face says, or be arrested. Doll and Subtle exit, calling Face a “rogue,” claiming they wish they had time to beat him.

Doll and Subtle plan to deceive Face, but he beats them to it. Face says Lovewit pardoned him, not Doll and Subtle, so they must run and abandon their share of the profits, which are bulky and not easily moved. Face is greedy, too, and he wants all their profits for himself.



ACT 5, SCENE 5

Lovewit enters wearing Hieronimo's cloak, and Mammon beats on the door. He tells Lovewit that the police have a warrant and will break down the door. Face enters and asks Lovewit if he has successfully married Dame Pliant. Lovewit says he has, and Face tells him to take off the cloak. Lovewit takes off the disguise and opens the door. Mammon enters with Surly, Kestrel, Ananias, Tribulation Wholesome, and the police. Everyone begins talking at once about “Captain Face” and the “chemical cozener.” Kestrel asks where his sister is, and Lovewit assures them all he has just returned to town and knows nothing of their complaints.

Lovewit is wearing Hieronimo's cloak—a character from Thomas Kyd's [The Spanish Tragedy](#)—to dupe Dame Pliant into believing he is Spanish so she would agree to marry him. Like the other characters, Lovewit, too, undergoes a deceitful transformation, and he also does so to satisfy his lust and greed. Lovewit is also deceiving Face and Subtle's victims—Lovewit knows all about Face's scams, but he lies because Face “gave” him Dame Pliant.



Lovewit tells the police they may go in and search, but they will find no criminals. Kestrel again asks where Dame Pliant is and threatens to “thump her” when he finds her. Lovewit tells Kestrel that his sister was supposed to marry a Spaniard, but he neglected her, so Lovewit married her instead. Kestrel is furious, but Mammon interrupts. Captain Face and the doctor are gone, he says, but Mammon's metal belongings are still in the basement. Lovewit tells Mammon he will only allow him to take the metal by court order. Mammon protests and tells Lovewit the metal already belongs to him, but Lovewit says he has no proof of that. If Mammon wants his things back, Lovewit says, he will have to petition the judge. Mammon says he has no intention of admitting to a judge he was scammed and leaves with Surly.

Kestrel is again violent and threatens to beat Dame Pliant (he's going to “thump her”) when he finds her. Lovewit is greedy and lustful in his marriage to Dame Pliant, and he is also greedy in refusing to give Mammon's metal back. He knows the metal belongs to Mammon—Lovewit at least knows that the metal isn't his own or Face's—yet he still refuses to hand it over. It is only Mammon's pride that allows Lovewit to keep the metal and, presumably, make even more money by selling it.



Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome claim they were promised Mammon's metal, but Lovewit threatens to beat them, so Ananias and Tribulation exit. Dame Pliant enters, and Kestrel says he will kill her for marrying without his permission. Lovewit draws his sword and dagger and challenges Kestrel to a quarrel, but Kestrel immediately backs down. Lovewit orders Face to pack a pipe of tobacco, and tells Kestrel to go enjoy a smoke with his sister. Kestrel and Dame Pliant exit, and Lovewit addresses the audience. He is very happy, Lovewit says, with his new wife and wealth. Face addresses the audience as well. "I am clean / Got off, from Subtle, Surly, Mammon, Doll, / Hot Ananias, Dapper, Druggier, all," he says, and asks for the audience to be his jury. "[I]f you do quit me," Face says, "rests / To feast you often, and invite new guests." Face and Lovewit exit.

Not only are Tribulation and Ananias portrayed as immoral religious fanatics, they are also portrayed as cowards, which further paints Anabaptists in a negative light. Clearly, Kestrel's lessons in quarreling and wits did him little good, as he immediately backs down from Lovewit and is forced to accept Lovewit and Dame Pliant's marriage. In Face's closing soliloquy, he admits he "got off" "clean" after all his scams. He wants the audience to be his jury, and if they "quit [him]," or acquit him, he will be free to spend his money, eat good food, and "invite new guests." Face has learned nothing and will go on conning people, which again underscores the deceptive nature of broader society and serves as a warning to the public not to be "cozened" by crooked alchemists or anyone else.





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