

The Formal Perfection in the Plot of *the Alchemist*: Jonson's Craftsmanship as Illustrated by the Drama

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Abstract

The Alchemist is an excellently constructed play that strictly observes the three neoclassical unities of time, place, and action. Not only does this play have the most complete unity of action of any of Jonson's plays, but it also observes the unities of time and place with more exactness than any other play by him. The entire action of the play takes no more than one single day. The entire action occurs at one place which is love wit's house in Black friars. And the action itself develops in a straight line without any digression or side-issues or irrelevances. The theme of the play may be stated as avarice and lust, and this theme is developed, amplified, elaborated, and illustrated about alchemy which constitutes a very important ingredient in the action of the play. Every incident and every situation contribute to the development and expansion of this theme.

Keywords: Formal perfection, plot, *The Alchemist*, Jonson, craftsmanship, drama, etc

1. Introduction

The Alchemist is an excellently constructed play with formal perfection of the plot highlighting the craftsmanship of its author (Russell, 1929). The entire action of the play takes no more than one single day and occurs in one place which is Lovewit's house in Black Friars.¹ Moreover, the action itself develops in a straight line without any digression or side-issues or irrelevances. The theme of the play may be stated as avarice and lust, and this theme is developed, amplified, elaborated, and illustrated about alchemy which constitutes a very important ingredient in the action of the play. Every incident and every situation contribute to the development and expansion of this theme (Arnold, 1965).

2.1 The Dramatic Opening and the Motive for the Action of the play:

The Opening of the play is highly dramatic. Two of the three conspirators are at loggerheads, each thinking of him to be the more important of the two and therefore underestimating the role of the other. However, each is indispensable to the continuance of the conspiracy (Ahmed, 2021; 2021b). The quarrel between these two- Face and Subtle- is brought to an end by the angry intervention of the third, a woman by the name of Dol Common. She tells them that neither of them can claim a primacy, that neither of them is the chief, and that each one of them, including herself, holds a position of equality in the "tripartite venture." She bluntly tells Subtle that he has no business to claim any priority.

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The quarrel is then made up, and the nefarious operation is quickly resumed. This quarrel, apart from providing considerable excitement to the audience, serves another important purpose also. It reveals to us the background of the two male conspirators, and it also acquaints us with the nature of the enterprise which they have undertaken. Face, we are told, was a mere "livery-three-pound-thrum" before this venture was undertaken; while Subtle was leading a life of starvation. (Ouellette, 2005). It was Face who provided Subtle with all the apparatus for his so-called alchemical process. Through this quarrel, the pretensions and the true natures of all the three partners are made clear; and a good deal of the exposition is managed quickly, excitingly, and with dramatic probability. The whole-hearted reconciliation provides the motive for the action which follows (Ahmed, 2021b).

2.2 Developments in Act I:

The rest of Act I serves to demonstrate the methods of the three partners in dealing with the various clients. The conspirators are now seen in action. Collaborating to cheat and rob their clients by giving them all sorts of assurances based on the philosopher's stone which the conspirators claim to have, and the miraculous powers that the doctor (Subtle) is believed to possess (Malin, 1992). The first client to come is Dapper, a lawyer's clerk, who wants a familiar or an attendant spirit to enable him to win money at horse races, card parties, and dice parties. He is assured that his desire would be fulfilled through the patronage of the Queen of Fairies who regards him as her nephew. He is then sent away with instructions to sharpen his senses by the use of vinegar (Aurangzeb, 2019). The next client is Drugger, a tobacconist, who wants commercial prosperity. In this case, the doctor uses his pretended knowledge of palmistry, astrology, and metoposcopy to assure him that his ambition would duly be achieved. This Act ends with Subtle's account of the ambitions of the next client, Sir Epicure Mammon, who is now seen approaching. Mammon hopes to get from Subtle the philosopher's stone which would enable him not only to become rich but to cure all the sufferers in the Kingdom of all their diseases (Sherman, n. d.).

2.3 New Characters Introduced in Act II:

Act II introduces some new Characters. They are Mammon, surly, and an Anabaptist by the name of Ananias. Mammon makes extravagant claims to surly on behalf of subtly and about Subtle's power to place the philosopher's stone at Mammon's disposal. Through the philosopher's stone, Mammon would become as rich as King Solomon was, and he would also be able to maintain as large a harem of mistresses and concubines as King Solomon had (Foley, 1949). Surly disputes Mammon's claim, whereupon a disputation takes place between surly and subtle. This disputation has tremendous importance in the structure of the play. Subtly provides a scientific basis for the theory of alchemy while Surly repudiates Subtle's claims. Another development in this Act is that Mammon, having caught a glimpse of Dol, feels almost bewitched by her seeming charms and graces. Face promises, in confidence, to procure the lady for him, thus providing a new dimension to Mammon's involvement with the conspirators. The next visitor Ananias who refuses to pay any more money to subtle and who is, therefore, dimension by the doctor with a threat that, if the Anabaptists do not pay an additional amount of money to him within an hour or so, he would wreck the laboratory and put an end to the alchemical process which is to yield the philosopher's stone for the benefit of the brethren at Amsterdam. Drugger now comes again, this time to acquire a sign of good luck for his business. A new element enters the action of the play with Drugger's reference to young Kastril and his widowed sister, Dame Pliant.

2.4 Further Developments in the Plot:

Act III develops the story of the Anabaptists one step further. The Anabaptists have now agreed to pay subtle the additional amount of money demanded by him. They further agree to buy the so-called orphans' goods which subtle wants them to buy on the plea that he would convert all those metallic articles into gold for them. Subtle also offers to mint or cast Dutch dollars to make the Anabaptists rich beyond all limits. The greed and hypocrisy of the Anabaptists are fully bright out in this episode. Dapper comes again and is promised an interview with the Queen of Fairies. But when this Act ends, Dapper has not only been robbed of everything he had on his person but also been gagged and stowed away in the toilet. Drugger brings Kastril with him, and Kastril asked to bring his sister to this establishment. Drugger has brought some tobacco for the doctor, and he promises to bring a damask suit also for him. Drugger conceives a hope that he would be able to marry Dame Pliant through the doctor's miraculous powers. All the dupes have by now been introduced to us. Their credulity, their desires, and their hopes have fully been revealed to us, as has been the extent to which they have already been robbed, and the extent to which they are further liable to be robbed.

The Climax and Failure of the Alchemical Process

In Act IV, Mammon is introduced to Dol, and he retires into a private chamber where he can make love to her. Surly comes disguised as a Spanish Don and is introduced to Dame Pliant whom he can now easily seduce but to whom he discloses his real identity and then makes a proposal of marriage. Surly now falls out with the conspirators but is driven away from the doctor's establishment by the combined strength of all the doctor's clients, and more especially by Kastril who proves to be very aggressive. The relationship between Mammon and Dol comes to an end suddenly when Dol pretends to have got into a fit of madness. An explosion is heard from the laboratory, whereupon subtle tells Mammon that, as a result of Mammon's lustful indulgence on these sacred premises, the alchemical process has collapsed. Mammon, a silly fool as he is, believes the doctor's explanation for the failure of the experiment and goes away, feeling ashamed of his disgraceful conduct leading to the collapse of the alchemical process. Thus, in this Act, we witness the climax of the alchemical process, the presence of which has been kept up so far by Subtle and Face. We also witness here the climax of the surly-subtle dispute, with surly suffering a disastrous defeat. Yet another dramatic development in this Act comes at the end when it is learned that the master of the house, namely Lovewit, has unexpectedly returned to the city.

2.3 New Complications and the Resolution in Act V:

New Complications arise in Act V. Face has now to explain to his master what has been going on during the master's absence. Subtle and Dol hatch a plot against Face who has been planning to get married to Dame Pliant while assuring Drugger that the widow would be married to him (Drugger). Subtle and Dol now decide to deprive Face of his share in the booty. But Face confesses the whole fraudulent enterprise to his master and enters into a conspiracy with him against all the others. Dapper is further duped when Dol disguises herself as the Queen of Fairies. Drugger is further duped when, instead of the widow being offered to him for marriage, she is persuaded to marry Lovewit. Subtle and Dol have to flee from the house to escape arrest. They are not allowed to carry with them the slightest bit of the accumulated booty. All the ex-clients of the doctor now come to demand action against the conspirators because they have now all discovered the reality and have realized their follies. But they are all driven away by Lovewit who, in return for his marriage to a rich widow, now shows a special consideration for his butler Jeremy (who had been posing as Face or Lungs).

3. The Conclusion of the Play:

The knaves and the fools go away at the end, disappointed and angry. But so does surly, the only character in the play to show any kind of positive virtue. Lovewit and Face keep the booty; while Kastril and his sister are quite content with the outcome. But the distribution of rewards and punishments has the randomness of life, not the neatness of poetic justice. At the end of the play, all the plots are brought together in the return of Lovewit and his final triumph over all the other characters.

3.1 A Flaw in the Structure:

An obvious flaw in the structure of this play is that the catastrophe has not been brought about from within the main action of the play. We would have expected the conspirators to work their ruin by cheating one another. But this is not the cause of their downfall. Or, we might have expected surly to bring about the exposure of the frauds practiced by the conspirators; but even this does not happen. They score a triumph over surly. The downfall of the conspirators is therefore not convincingly motivated. The author has resorted to an extraneous device to bring about this downfall, the device being the unexpected return of Lovewit to the city. It is no defense of this device to say that Lovewit had to return home some time or the other. His return is sudden and inexplicable. His return is a surprise, almost a shock. However, if we accept this sudden development, then we must recognize the fact that all the strands and the action of the play have closely been interwoven, so closely that all become almost one.

Some Other Masters of Structure

As pointed out by a critic, structurally this play is driven forward by a series of knocks on the door. A knock usually means that the customer currently on stage must somehow, and quickly, be disposed of, to another part of the house or out by another exit. A knock also implies a swift change of dress for all three conspirators. Besides, the various dupes cannot be allowed to meet one another. For Mammon to talk to Ananias, for example, or for Ananias to exchange notes with Dapper, would mean disaster for the conspirators. A few encounters between the dupes are permitted, but these take place under the strict supervision of Face. Dapper, for instance, is allowed to remain in the room with Drugger and Kastril, but only briefly. Face and Subtle must keep their victims rigorously apart to maintain their edifice of fraud and cheating.

This, however, becomes increasingly difficult. The idea of pushing Dame Pliant into the arms of surly (disguised as a Spanish Don) is a contrivance that has to be adopted in desperation because Dol is at this time busy with Mammon. If Dame Pliant had not been so stupid, this episode would have led to an immediate exposure of the fraud being practiced by the conspirators. In the end, it is the convergence of surly, Mammon, Kastril, Ananias, and Tribulation outside Lovewit's house in Act V, quite as much as the return of Lovewit, which finally demolishes the partnership. Up to that point, Face and Subtle have managed to keep seven quite different comic plots all running parallel to one another within the alchemist's establishment.

3.2 The Laboratory, a Symbol at the Centre of the Play:

The laboratory---though it is never seen--- is the symbol at the center of the play. It is the dream factory, the most potent instrument of delusion. The presence and the location of the laboratory are firmly established early in the play. This one fixed in space obliged Jonson to have other; the two doors, right and left, one to the outside world, and the other to the back way. Jonson the scholar was no doubt pleased to construct a play that fitted so neatly the neo-classical prescription for the unities of time, place, and action (Donaldson, 1997). Jonson, the

man of the theatre, turned these strict limitations to brilliant use in contriving comic stage business --- the comings and goings, quick changes, unexpected entries, and so on. But scholar and craftsman are both subservient to the imaginative artist who saw the apparatus for making gold as the central symbol of a play about human greed and credulity, and their inevitable consequence in disappointment and loss. (Amir & Aurangzeb, 2020).

3.3 Unifying Factors on the Play:

There are two features of this play that serve to unify it and thus produce what is known as the unity of action. One is the avarice or greed for wealth which is a vice of almost all the characters in the play. Although each character is distinguished clearly from all the others, there is something common to them all, and this is an obsession with money and the desire to become rich. This common passion for gold is money serves as a close link between all the plots in the play (Craig, 1999). Each plot centers around an individual character, whether it be Dapper, Drugger, or Mammon, or the Anabaptists, or surly or Lovewit, or Kastril. But all the characters are guilty of the same folly and the same kind of credulity. The play offers a large variety of eccentric characters, each involved in a separate plot (seven in all), but the play ties them firmly together by making each a part of the central business venture of Subtle, Face, and Dol. The second is the use of blank verse throughout the play, except at only a few places where we have prose or rhymed verse. Every character speaks in blank verse, and this too is a unifying factor.

3.4 Increasing Concentration and Rising Tempo:

Another interesting feature of the structure of this play is that, despite its great wealth of comic material, the play conveys a sense of purposeful, and constantly accelerating, movement. Dryden pointed out, in his famous commentary on Jonson's *The silent woman*, that the business of that play rises in every Act, that the second Act is greater than the first, the third Act greater than the second, and so on to the fifth. Precisely, the same is true of the *Alchemist* (Amir & Ahmed, 2020a; 2020b). There is a carefully phased build-up of characters. Five characters appear in Act I, seven appear in Act II, eight appear in Act III, nine appear in Act IV, and twelve--- or including the neighbours, officers, and the priest, twenty-one ---- in Act V. there is also one an accumulation of even more complex intrigues so that we get the nation of watching a juggler add more and more balls or other objects to those already being thrown up into the air by him. And, finally, there is, as in *Sejanus* and in *Volpone*, a sense of rising tension conveyed by the rogues, alliance itself, as Face and Subtle, re-united into a shaky partnership by Dol in the opening scene, gradually revert to a state of rivalry, and begin to work against each other to secure the upper hand. The Dol's peering through the window, and the constant knocking on the door, keep us tensely aware of the unseen world outside the house, a potential source of profit but also a threat. At any moment, the house might become a prison, and when Lovewit returns and Face at once announces that they are undone, the house does become a prison (Craig, 1999; Donaldson, 1997; Dykeman, 1988).

3.5 A Bold and Unsettling Structure:

According to a critic, *The Alchemist* incorporates the motif of the empty house taken over by a servant and his accomplice, which appears in one of the plays by the ancient Roman dramatist, Plautus; but in this play, the formula of Plautus is ironically inverted. Had Jonson followed that formula straightforwardly, Surly would have been the play's hero and agent of release, and the rogues would have been the representatives of the anti-comic society

(Greenhill, 1993). Surly would have overcome the rogues, and the play would have ended with his marriage to Dame pliant and with a general reconciliation. But the play written by Jonson is very different. Here Surly is the focus of the anti-comic mood, and the rogues represent the essential comic virtues of vitality and joy. Eventually, Surly goes away baffled and alone, Face remains undefeated, and Lovewit wins the girl and the wealth. Jonson does end the play traditionally with a marriage, but the traditional concomitants of this ending --- individual self-discovery and a heightened sense of social unity--- are not present. Lovewit's marriage seems a purely superficial change. Everything stays just as it was. This is a very bold and unsettling structure, and it has prompted some disapproval and several different critical interpretations. The conclusion, in particular, has been frequently attacked. For instance, in the seventeenth century, John Dennis said that the catastrophe (or the denouement) was surely a bad one; and that a gentleman of fortune joining with his Knavish servant, to cheat several gulls of their money and goods, was equally mean and immoral.

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