

THE ALCHEMIST

by Ben Jonson



THE AUTHOR

Ben Jonson (1572-1637) was born in London, the son of a minister who died two months before he was born. He was unable to attend Cambridge University, as he had wished, and after brief turns as a bricklayer and soldier, he joined the London theater scene as an actor and playwright. As part of Philip Henslowe's company, he became acquainted with the leading lights of the Elizabethan theater, including William Shakespeare, who acted in some of Jonson's plays. His first great comedy was *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), later followed by *Volpone* (1606), *The Alchemist* (1610), and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). He was a favorite of James I, from whom he earned a sizeable pension, and is believed to have been England's first poet laureate. He became so popular that a group of his followers, calling themselves the Tribe of Ben, gathered regularly to discuss his works. In addition to Shakespeare, his circle of friends included Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, Inigo Jones (who designed scenery for some of his plays), John Donne, and Francis Bacon. After his death, however - even up to the present day - Jonson has suffered as a result of the accident of being born in the same era as Shakespeare; few have compared the two in ways that are favorable to the younger man.

Jonson's personal life was somewhat tumultuous. His marriage to Ann Lewis was an unhappy one, and produced three children, all of whom died at a young age. Both his writing and his personal conduct got him into trouble on occasion; in one case he was imprisoned because one of his plays was considered lewd and irreligious, and on another occasion he served a prison sentence for killing another actor in a duel. While in prison in 1598, he converted to Roman Catholicism, though he returned to the Church of England in 1610. The battles of words among the London theater companies were notorious for their virulence, and Jonson was right in the middle of them. Though he finally made peace with his rivals, he earned a lifelong reputation as a harsh critic of the writings of others. After 1620 his dramatic output declined as he suffered several strokes. When he died in 1637, a great crowd of mourners followed his body to its burial in Westminster Abbey.

The Alchemist, like all of Jonson's best comedies, has a contemporary setting and deals with real people like those with whom his audiences would have been familiar. The works are satires, observing the classical unities of time, place, and action while mocking the absurdities of English society in the context of ridiculous plots and overblown characters, often readily identifiable by the names he gives to them. *The Alchemist* is often considered unsuitable for modern audiences because of the extent to which it is influenced by Jonson's classical training (it is full of allusions to other

works unfamiliar to readers and observers today), his determination to use vernacular dialogue (the extensive use of slang makes it hard to understand four hundred years later), and the use of alchemical jargon. The result is a play that is hard to understand without extensive footnotes. Critics have also raised questions about the morality of the play. In Jonson's day some accused him of mocking religion, while others pointed out the somewhat ambiguous degree of justice meted out at the end of the story.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Lovewit - A prosperous Londoner who owns the house in Blackfriars where the action of the play takes place. He is away in the country in order to escape the plague until his return in the last act.
- Jeremy - Lovewit's butler, he is also known as Face when he grows a beard. He also disguises himself as a captain in the army and as Lungs, the assistant to the so-called alchemist. One of his roles is to refer customers to Subtle.
- Subtle - A confidence man and trickster who passes himself off as an alchemist.
- Doll Common - A prostitute who is Subtle's mistress and assists Subtle and Face in their schemes.
- Dapper - An easily-deceived lawyer's clerk who seeks Subtle's help to win at gambling. Subtle convinces him that he is the nephew of the Faery Queen.
- Abel Drugger - The owner of a tobacco shop, he wants Subtle's supernatural insight to help him set up his new shop in the best way.
- Sir Epicure Mammon - A boastful and greedy knight who wants the philosopher's stone in order to enhance his wealth and pleasures.
- Pertinax Surly - A gambler who is a friend of Mammon, he is skeptical about alchemy and recognizes Subtle and his friends for the frauds they are.
- Tribulation Wholesome - The hypocritical pastor of a congregation whose members have emigrated to Amsterdam. He wants the philosopher's stone as a means of spreading his faith.
- Ananias - A former tailor who is a deacon in Wholesome's congregation. He warns his pastor against doing business with an ungodly man like Subtle.
- Kastriil - A rich but foolish country lad who comes to London to learn to quarrel like men in the city.
- Dame Pliant - Kastriil's sister, she is a rich, pretty, but gullible widow of nineteen.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“T he sickness hot, a master quit, for fear,
H is house in town, and left one servant there.
E ase him corrupted, and gave means to know
A Cheater and his punk, who now brought low,
L eaving their narrow practice, were become
C oz’ners at large; and only wanting some
H ouse to set up, with him they here contract,
E ach for a share, and all begin to act.
M uch company they draw, and much abuse,
I n casting figures, telling fortunes, news,
S elling of flies, flat bawdry, with the stone;
T ill it, and they, and all in fume are gone.” (Argument)

“The children of perdition are oft times
Made instruments even of the greatest works.” (Tribulation, IIIi, 12-13)

“Nothing’s more wretched than a guilty conscience.” (Face, Vii, 48)

NOTES

Argument and Prologue - The Argument, which summarizes the plot, is arranged as an acrostic with the first letter of each line spelling out the title of the play. It tells the audience that a trickster and his mistress take over the house of an absent rich man and use it to deceive the gullible, but that they eventually are found out. The prologue indicates that the action takes place in the Blackfriars section of London in 1610 (at the time and in the neighborhood of the theater in which the play was first performed), and that the author intends the portrayal of the follies with which the city is filled to edify the audience by encouraging them to live better lives by learning from the scoundrels and gullible marks in the play.

Act I, scene 1 - The play takes place in the home of Lovewit in Blackfriars. He is away, and the house has been taken over by Subtle and his mistress Doll with the connivance of Lovewit’s butler Jeremy, also known as Face. As the play begins, Subtle and Face, who is dressed like an army captain, are arguing about who is more important while Doll tries to calm them down so the neighbors don’t hear and discover their deception. Subtle wants to be in charge because he has taught Face all his tricks, while Face points out that Subtle was starving in the marketplace before Face gave him a place to work his swindles. They almost come to blows before Doll disarms them and insists they end their quarrel and agree to work together as equals. Someone knocks at the door and Subtle fears it is Face’s master, but Face assures him that his master will not return to London until the plague has run its course.

Act I, scene 2 - The man at the door is Dapper, a gullible young lawyer’s clerk who wants to consult a familiar spirit so he can win money betting on horse races. Subtle enters in a velvet cap and gown as a doctor of philosophy. He and Face, who had met Dapper the night before in a tavern, convince

him that he is blessed by the Queen of Faery and will surely win when he gambles. He then pays them and promises to give them half his winnings.

Act I, scene 3 - The next victim is Abel Druggier, a tobacconist, who also has been referred to Subtle by "Captain Face." He is setting up a new shop and wants Subtle to use his art to tell him the best way to arrange his space. Subtle promises him that he will so prosper that he will soon be made sheriff, which he discerns by reading different aspects of his physiognomy. He then tells him how to arrange his shop using a variety of obscure astrological and alchemical terms. Assured that he will soon be rich, Druggier gives Subtle gold for his services.

Act I, scene 4 - Doll Common rushes in and warns Subtle that Sir Epicure Mammon is on his way. Subtle has promised him the philosopher's stone, and he is already boasting of all that he will do for others (and for himself) once he has this miraculous substance in his possession.

Act II, scene 1 - As Sir Epicure and his friend Surly approach Subtle's shop, the former promises the latter that after this day he will be rich and no longer have to gamble for money. He intends to take the philosopher's stone and turn all the metal in his house into gold, then buy up more metal and do the same with that. The stone promises health and long life as well. Surly, however, remains skeptical, but Sir Epicure assures him that he possesses books on the philosopher's stone written by Solomon, Moses, and Adam in High Dutch, the original language of man.

Act II, scene 2 - Face, disguised as Subtle's assistant Lungs, ushers Mammon and Surly into the shop. Face shows them a flask within which a liquid is changing colors, and Mammon assures him that he will run the harem Mammon intends to organize when he has as many wives as Solomon.

Act II, scene 3 - Subtle enters and criticizes Mammon for his haste; after all, such great magic takes a great deal of time and cannot be rushed. He also warns his customer that the philosopher's stone may only be used for the good of mankind. If it is used for selfish purposes, a curse will surely follow. Surly still needs to be convinced, and Subtle begins calling meaningless but impressive-sounding instructions to Face in the laboratory, but Surly recognizes him for the fraud he is. When Subtle tells Mammon an ingredient is missing and asks him for money to purchase it, Surly is sure he is right, but Mammon gives Subtle ten pounds. When Surly complains of the obscure language used by alchemists, Subtle replies that secrecy is essential in order to keep such power from the hands of those who would abuse it. At this point an angry Doll enters, and Subtle rushes her into the back room, telling Mammon that she is the mad sister of a lord come to be cured. Surly suspects Subtle is running a bawdy house on the side, but Mammon begs for a conversation with the noble lady. Face, still in disguise, tells Mammon to return in two hours for a private conference with the lady, and meanwhile to send all his metals so Subtle can turn them into gold. Surly, however, recognizes Face as a notorious bawd.

Act II, scene 4 - Subtle, Face, and Doll celebrate their success with Mammon, and Face is determined to gull Surly as well. Doll looks out the window and sees Ananias, the deacon of a Dissenting congregation in Amsterdam, approaching. He and his pastor want the philosopher's stone to advance the cause of their faith.

Act II, scene 5 - Ananias wants to buy Mammon's metal goods to give to the poor, but also wants to know when the philosopher's stone will be ready. Subtle drives him away, arguing that no one named Ananias, that betrayer of the apostles, should be engaged in holy business. He knows that this will bring the pastor himself to their shop.

Act II, scene 6 - Face enters with Abel Drugger, who wants a sign for his shop that will guarantee business. He tells Subtle about a young widow who has moved in next door. He is interested in her, but her brother insists that she marry no one below the rank of knight. Face tells him to bring both her and her brother to the shop, where Subtle will advance his cause. Subtle insists, however, that Doll be kept ignorant of the rich young widow.

Act III, scene 1 - Parson Tribulation Wholesome is comforting his deacon, assuring him that bearing insults is the lot of the righteous. Ananias warns him that Subtle is not a godly man, but Wholesome tells him that any means should be sought to advance the faith. The ungodly can be instruments of righteousness, and the wicked may be converted by the power of the stone.

Act III, scene 2 - Wholesome and Ananias enter Subtle's shop. The parson assures Subtle that Ananias is repentant, and that the members of his congregation will lend their hands to Subtle's great work and their purses to purchase goods for the benefit of orphans. Subtle's eyes light up at the mention of money, and he assures Wholesome that the healing power of the stone will draw many into his church. He argues that the many scruples observed by the strict religionists will be unnecessary once they have the stone, though Ananias doubts that such scruples should be set aside. Subtle invites Wholesome and Ananias to view the goods they are to purchase while he entertains another customer.

Act III, scene 3 - Face enters in his captain's uniform and reports that Surly never showed up for their meeting. Subtle gets rid of the Dissenters because he is expecting a Spanish count who is enamored of Doll. Instead, Dapper enters, followed shortly thereafter by Abel Drugger and Kastril, the widow's brother.

Act III, scene 4 - Subtle assures Dapper that he will soon win at cards as often as he wants. Meanwhile, Kastril wants the power to win quarrels, fighting in the country like a city brawler. Face assures him that he can also make a rich match for his sister, and Kastril goes immediately to fetch her.

Act III, scene 5 - Subtle and Face bring out a robe supposedly sent by the Faery Queen and put it on Dapper, then blindfold him and order him to cast aside all worldly goods, including his purse and ring. When they see Sir Epicure coming, they gag Dapper with a piece of gingerbread and hide him in the privy.

Act IV, scene 1 - Face, dressed as Subtle's assistant, admits Mammon and tells him that Subtle is working on transforming his base metals into gold and silver, and that Doll is waiting for his visit. Face tells him that Doll is anxious to see him, and warns him about what topics of conversation are appropriate for a great lady. Face ushers her in, listens to Mammon falling all over himself in praise of her, then leaves before he bursts out laughing. Mammon continues to court Doll effusively, giving her a diamond ring and promising her the world once he obtains the philosopher's stone.

Act IV, scene 2 - After Mammon and Doll leave, Kastril arrives with his sister Dame Pliant. Kastril tries to quarrel with Subtle, but the latter tells him he is doing it all wrong. He then kisses Dame Pliant twice and calls her a fine lady, at which she is impressed. Face then enters in his captain's uniform. He too kisses Dame Pliant, and she enjoys his attentions as well. Subtle invites Kastril and his sister into his laboratory, where he promises to teach him to quarrel properly. At this point Subtle and Face are each determined to have Dame Pliant for himself.

Act IV, scene 3 - Face insists that Dame Pliant should be his, and threatens to tell Doll if Subtle continues making a play for her. Surly then arrives disguised as a Spanish nobleman. He speaks Spanish to them, and they, assuming he knows no English, insult him openly. Surly wants to see Doll, who is otherwise occupied. Subtle and Face argue about what to do, and Face threatens to call Doll and the widow to come downstairs. Subtle agrees that Face should have Dame Pliant, but intends to give her to the "Spanish count" instead.

Act IV, scene 4 - Face brings Kastril and his sister back in and Subtle announces that Dame Pliant is about to become a Spanish countess. She is reluctant to do so because the incident involving the Spanish Armada is so recent, but her brother promises to beat her if she refuses. Surly is enthralled and takes her into the garden while Subtle takes Kastril aside for his first quarreling lesson.

Act IV, scene 5 - Mammon and Doll enter, with Doll rapidly speaking so much nonsense that Mammon is unable to get a word in edgewise. Face enters as Subtle's assistant and Mammon asks him how to stop her from talking. Subtle then comes in and accuses Mammon of immoral behavior with the "great lady" as Face takes her from the room. Mammon denies it, but Subtle tells him that this will delay the work of changing base metals into gold by at least a month. Suddenly a loud noise is heard offstage, and Face rushes in announcing that the laboratory has exploded. Mammon moans that he has lost his entire investment because of his lustful intentions. Face tells him to go home and repent of his sins, and tells him that to show his repentance he should give a hundred pounds to the Bethlehem Hospital for the insane; Face even volunteers to stop by his house and collect the money. After he leaves, they prepare to deal with Surly and Dame Pliant, who presumably have been making love in the garden.

Act IV, scene 6 - Surly and Dame Pliant enter, and he tells her that he is not really a count, but has come to uncover the knavery of the inhabitants of the house. He has not taken advantage of her, as Subtle and Face thought he would, but tells her that he is a poor but honest man who desires to marry her. Subtle then enters, assuming that the count has made Dame Pliant a countess, and in the process of congratulating them begins to pick Surly's pockets. Surly then knocks him down and denounces him for a fraud and scoundrel. Face comes in and Surly denounces him as well. He promptly rushes out, but Surly seizes Subtle before he can do so.

Act IV, scene 7 - Face returns with Kastril, telling him that his sister and Subtle have been insulted by Surly and that now is the ideal time to practice his quarreling. Surly, he says, is not a Spanish count at all, but the real Spanish count is due to appear shortly, so Kastril must drive off the imposter. Before he can do so, Abel Drugger enters, and Face takes him aside and tells him to back up whatever he says because Surly is trying to take the widow he desires to marry. He then tells Kastril that Surly owes Drugger money for goods obtained from his shop, showing that he is a notorious cheat, which Drugger confirms. Before Kastril can chase Surly away, however, Ananias

comes in and promptly identifies Surly, in his Spanish costume, as an agent of Antichrist. Totally outnumbered, Surly leaves in disgust. Face praises Kastril for the quality of his quarreling and sends him after Surly to make sure he doesn't return. While Face tells Drugger to find a Spanish costume so he can win the widow, Subtle tells Ananias that he sadly cannot make money for his congregation because if he did, the government would lock him up in the Tower of London and force him to make money for them. Ananias is disappointed and declares that he and his people must go abroad to seek prosperity elsewhere. Doll then comes in and announces that the master of the house has returned. Face prepares to return to his costume as Jeremy the butler, while Subtle and Doll get ready to flee, taking the alchemist's equipment with them. Mammon's metals, which were not really destroyed, are to be taken away later.

Act V, scene 1 - Lovewit enters, surrounded by his neighbors, who tell him that people have been coming and going every day during his absence. He speculates about what Jeremy might have been up to, but they insist that they haven't seen Jeremy at all. He knocks at the door, but no one answers, and the local blacksmith goes to get his tools to force the door open.

Act V, scene 2 - Finally Jeremy answers the door and tells his master that the house has been visited with the plague, carried by the cat, and that he had sent the cat away and shut up the house for a month. When confronted with the neighbors' tales about constant visitors, he denies everything and swears that the door has not been opened in weeks. Face then sees Mammon and Surly coming toward the house.

Act V, scene 3 - Surly has told Mammon how he has been tricked, and the two knock at the door determined to get their revenge. Jeremy the butler answers the door and introduces them to Lovewit, and both deny that any chicanery has taken place in the house. Mammon and Surly leave, intending to get a warrant to search the house. Kastril appears next, angry as usual and wanting to retrieve his sister, but Face again denies everything. Then Ananias and Parson Wholesome show up, condemning the house as a nest of abominations. Face will not admit them, and they go off to find the constable. Lovewit is dumbfounded, and Face assures him that they all have escaped from an insane asylum. At this point Dapper cries out; he is still shut up in the privy. Face realizes that he has been caught at last and promises to tell his master everything. They send the neighbors away and he begs forgiveness for abuse of his trust, then offers to unite his master with a rich and beautiful young widow if he will simply put on the costume of a Spanish count.

Act V, scene 4 - Subtle leads Dapper in, still blindfolded; he has eaten the gingerbread gag, which allowed him to cry out from the privy. Subtle promises to introduce him to the Faery Queen, at which point Doll enters in the appropriate costume. She confers her blessing on him, promises him riches, and tells him to bring some of his winnings to her. Drugger then comes to the door, but Face sends him away to get a parson so he can marry the widow. Meanwhile Subtle and Doll plan their escape, before which Doll will get as much jewelry from the gullible widow as possible. Drugger returns with the parson, but Face tells him to go wash so he will look his best for the wedding; the others think that while he does so, Face intends to marry the widow himself. Subtle, however, knows that Doll has not had time to perform her larceny on the poor girl, but Face reenters. The three divide their takings, then Face tells them that he has confessed all to his master and called the police, who will be there shortly. Subtle and Doll curse him roundly and flee out the back door, thus dissolving their partnership.

Act V, scene 5 - Lovewit enters in the Spanish count costume, along with the parson, who has just performed the wedding between him and the young widow. Officers, accompanied by Mammon, Surly, Kastril, Ananias, and Parson Wholesome, are hammering on the door, and Jeremy encourages his master to change back into his own clothes. Lovewit opens the door, and the angry crowd demands to see Subtle, Face, Doll, and Dame Pliant. Lovewit offers to let them search the house, insisting that he has been out of town and that his butler has confessed to allowing a trio of scoundrels to use the premises, all of whom are now gone. He says that the only person in the house is a young widow who, disappointed at being deserted by a Spanish count, has married him instead. Mammon searches the house and finds that the tricksters have fled, but is somewhat mollified to discover his metal goods hidden in the cellar. Though he cannot prove that they are his, Lovewit agrees to return them to him. After he and Surly leave, Ananias and Tribulation come upstairs and claim the metals for their church, but Lovewit threatens to drive them from the house with a cudgel. Drugger returns, only to be told that he took too long washing his face, and that the widow is already married. Kastril then comes in, dragging his sister behind him and berating her for marrying a scoundrel. He then is told that she is married to Lovewit, and he quickly changes his tune. Lovewit and Kastril, accompanied by Dame Pliant, leave to enjoy a pipe together while Jeremy delivers the Epilogue.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* is a product of the Jacobean era in which it was written. Not only did the playwright set it in his own time and people it with characters types that would have been familiar to his audiences, but he filled the mouths of the characters with contemporary slang and obscure alchemical jargon. Do these qualities make the play unsuitable for modern audiences? Why or why not? Support your conclusion by discussing particulars of the play that render it suitable or unsuitable for readers and viewers in the twenty-first century.
2. Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* is full of seventeenth-century street slang and obscure alchemical jargon, making it virtually unintelligible to a modern reader without extensive footnotes. Would these difficulties be more or less problematic if the play were seen rather than being read? Why or why not? Consider especially the impact of the scenes where such language is dominant. How would they look and sound to a modern audience? Would the lack of intelligibility enhance or detract from the scenes? Why do you think so?
3. The names of the characters in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* show them to be types rather than distinct individuals. How does this use of character types rather than believable people contribute to the satire that Jonson clearly intends? Do you consider such typing too obvious? Why or why not?
4. Seventeenth-century critics often claimed that Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* was immoral because it mocked religion. Discuss the treatment of the religious figures in the play - Parson Tribulation Wholesome and his deacon Ananias. Is the playwright ridiculing religion or religious hypocrisy? Are the two characters pictured as hypocrites, or is he portraying in extreme ways qualities that he associated with religious dissenters?

5. Discuss the two religious figures in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, Tribulation Wholesome and Ananias. Compare and contrast their faith in God and their faith in Subtle and Face. Is the playwright trying to compare the two, suggesting that both are the responses of gullible fools, or is he instead contrasting them? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
6. In Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, critics differ as to the proper identification of the two religious figures, Parson Tribulation Wholesome and his deacon Ananias, of whom the playwright clearly does not think highly. Some have identified them as Puritans, others as Anabaptists. From your knowledge of the seventeenth-century religious environment in England, which of these critics do you think is right? Do the two characters fit better the characteristics of Puritans or Anabaptists? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
7. While the mockery of religious hypocrisy plays a relatively minor role in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, it certainly is present. Compare and contrast Jonson's treatment of religious hypocrites with that of Moliere in *Tartuffe*. Which playwright could more effectively make the claim that he was attacking hypocrisy rather than religion in general? Support your conclusion with details from both plays.
8. Discuss the morality of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, particularly in regard to the meting out of justice at the end of the play. Do the characters get their just deserts in the end? Why or why not?
9. To what extent is Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* a demonstration of the adage that "a fool and his money are soon parted"? Are those who are taken in by Subtle and his companions fools, or are they blinded by their own greed and lust?
10. Jeremy the butler (also known as Face, Lungs, and Ulen Spiegel) is the central character in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. Overall, is he a good or bad character? Does his guilty conscience leading to repentance in the end make up for the chicanery of which he is so willing a part throughout the play? Do you think the playwright intends him to be admirable? Why or why not?
11. The central plot device in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* involves the attempt to turn base metals into gold, but some critics have remarked that the real story involves, not changing metals, but changing people. To what extent are the characters in the story changed as a result of their experiences? Choose three characters and discuss how and why they are changed over the course of the play. How do these changes contribute to the message that Jonson is seeking to send?
12. Compare and contrast the tricksters in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* with those in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Consider the motives behind their trickery, the means they use to deceive others, and the consequences of their deception at the ends of the plays. Which do you consider the more effective satire?

13. Confidence men can only succeed in their deceptions when those they are seeking to trick are dominated by lust, greed, pride, and other sins and follies. To what extent is this the case in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*? Choose three of the characters deceived by Subtle and his crew and show how they are merely getting what they deserve because of their own besetting sins.
14. Like many of Shakespeare's comedies, Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* gets a lot of mileage from the use of false or mistaken identities. The three scoundrels running the con game change identities almost faster than the play changes scenes, so that no one is who he or she really seems to be. To what extent is this also the case with the gullible targets of the con men? Which of them seek to put on different faces for their own self-aggrandizement? Which ones, if any, eventually realize the importance of being themselves?
15. The confidence game at the center of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* involves three scoundrels pretending to practice alchemy, though some of the tricks they pull go beyond the range of true alchemists and simply reflect the various tricks attempted by seventeenth-century con men. To what extent does the nature of the con games played by the trio date the play? Since no one today would attempt to fool others by claiming to be able to turn lead into gold, does the play lack contemporary applicability? What underlying lessons contained in Jonson's satire are equally applicable to the twenty-first century, and what modern practices might easily be substituted for alchemy and the other tricks played by Subtle and his companions?
16. In both Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals*, we find characters who want to leave their country background and become part of a more sophisticated environment by changing their speech patterns, by learning either to quarrel or to swear like those to whose company they aspire. Compare and contrast the characters of Kastril and Bob Acres. Consider the nature of their ambitions, the ways in which they seek to fulfill them, and the ways in which the playwrights use them as vehicles for their satire.
17. In Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, Subtle and his companions in crime claim to be able to turn base metals into gold, but what is the real nature of the transformation that they bring about? What do they turn into gold, and how successful are they at doing so? What enables this transformation to take place?
18. In Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, can one conclude that *all* of the characters in the play are greedy for gold? Why or why not? What exceptions might you cite to the overall critique that Jonson seems to present of human nature?
19. In Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, do you find any of the characters admirable? Why or why not? What does the paucity of admirable characters tell you about Jonson's assessment of human nature? Do you consider him to be a complete cynic?