

Justin Kolb (Madison, USA)

CREATURES OF ART:

Character as dramatic homunculus in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*

To describe a London besotted with transformative arts, Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610) appropriates practices and modes of thought from alchemy, particularly ideas about the generation and refinement of life derived from the work of the German alchemist Paracelsus. Paracelsian chymistry was a considerable expansion of alchemy's domain, arguing that all substances – not just the metals traditionally manipulated by alchemists – could be transformed through alchemy. The refinement and creation of human beings and other living things, rather than gold, was the pinnacle of this art.

The *Alchemist* is a product of the wide dissemination of alchemical practices and modes of thought in Jacobean London. It serves as Jonson's attempt to describe a world reinvented by human action and the creatures of art that would inhabit it. Adapting ideas from Paracelsian alchemy – particularly the process of creating a homunculus, or artificial man – Jonson creates his own artificial humans: the play's characters. While *The Alchemist's* promised new world blows up with Subtle's lab, at least one enduring new creature is invented: the mercurial Face, drama's homunculus.

To describe a city besotted with transformative arts, Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610) appropriates modes of thought from alchemy, particularly ideas about the generation and refinement of life derived from the work of the German physician Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus. Paracelsian chymistry called for a considerable expansion of alchemy's domain, arguing that all substances – not just the metals traditionally manipulated by alchemists – were composed of the three principles: combustible sulphur, fluid mercury, and solid salt.¹ These principles are mirrored in the play by three confidence artists: the ersatz alchemist Subtle, the prostitute and skilled actress Dol Common, and the clever servant Face.

Taking place over the course of a single day, *The Alchemist* is set in a house in the fashionable Blackfriars neighborhood of London, a location that neatly mirrors the Blackfriars Theater in which the play was first performed. Due to an outbreak of plague, the master of the house, the wealthy widower

¹ William Newman, *Promethean Ambitions. Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 107 f.

Lovewit, decamps to his country estate, leaving his butler Jeremy to mind his home. The play's acrostic argument neatly describes what follows:

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 ozeners 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.²

Jeremy allies with the “Cheater” Subtle and “his punk” Dol to form a “venture tripartite” (I.1.135) and extract gold from the pockets of various gulls with promises of miraculous alchemical feats. Jeremy also takes on a pair of alter egos, playing both the loyal alchemist's assistant Lungs and the rakish pimp Face. The three principles soon acquire an array of dupes, all seeking to harness the power of Paracelsian alchemy and other occult knowledge to improve their lives and fulfill their desires.

The Alchemist is thus a product of the wide dissemination of alchemical practices and modes of thought in Jacobean London. It serves as Jonson's attempt to describe what a new world made by such artifice would look like and what creatures of art would inhabit it. Adapting ideas from Paracelsian alchemy, particularly the process of creating a homunculus, or artificial man, through the putrefaction of human tissue in dung, Jonson creates his own artificial humans: the play's characters. While *The Alchemist's* promised new world blows up with Subtle's lab, at least one enduring new creature is invented: the mercurial Face, drama's homunculus.

One of the less-appreciated running jokes in *The Alchemist* is the wide dissemination of alchemical language and ideas among the play's characters. The vainglorious knight Sir Epicure Mammon boasts of having read alchemical treatises by Adam, Solomon, and Moses (and his sister) “in high Dutch” (II.1.83) and even the skeptical Surly, who seeks to expose Subtle as a fraud, responds to the chymist's lectures with his own cascade of alchemical jargon:

² Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, in: *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, Vol. 3, ed. by Gerald A. Wilkes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, p. 231. All citations from Jonson's plays are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

What else are all your terms,
 Whereon no one o' your writers grees with the other?
 Of your elixir, your lac virginis,
 Your stone, your medicine, and your chryso sperm,
 Your sal, your sulphur, and your mercury,
 Your oil of height, your tree of life, your blood,
 Your toad, your crow, your dragon, and your panther,
 Your sun, your moon, your firmament, your adrop,
 Your lato, azoch, zernich, chibrit, heautarit,
 And then, your red man, and your white woman,
 With all your broths, your menstrues, and materials,
 Of piss, and egg-shells, women's terms, man's blood,
 Hair o' the head, burnt clouts, chalk, merds, and clay,
 Powder of bones, scalings of iron, glass,
 And worlds of other strange ingredients,
 Would burst a man to name? (II.3.183-197)

Far from hermetic knowledge, alchemy in Jonson's London is as ubiquitous and accessible as the "piss, and egg-shells" (II.3.194) it works upon. Even the most foolish character's use of its language echoes authentic alchemical texts. Mammon claims that "Sisyphus was damned / To roll the ceaseless stone only because / He would have made ours common" (II.3.208-210), but Subtle predicts that the pharmacist Abel Drugger will produce the philosopher's stone with the "arsenic, / Vitriol, sal-tartar, argaile, alkali, / [and] Cinoper" (I.3.75-77) in his shop.

The widespread faith in better living through chymistry portrayed in *The Alchemist* reflects the nascent scientific culture of Elizabethan and Jacobean London. The play was written in the midst of a pan-European revival of interest in alchemical knowledge.³ Even as they claimed alchemical knowledge was only suitable for an enlightened elite, alchemical writers acknowledged the commercial dissemination practiced by tradesman 'chymists'. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the author of the treatise *Via Veritas Unicae* asked his reader to consider

[...] how many ignorant persons, such as cobblers, tailors, bankrupt merchants, and tavern keepers pretend to a knowledge of this Art, and after a few years' unsuccessful experimenting in the laboratory, call themselves great doctors, announce in boastful and sesquipedalian language their power to cure many diseases, and promise mountains of gold. Those promises are empty wind, and their medicines rank poison, with which they fill the churchyards, and for the impudent abuse of which

³ Allen G. Debus, introduction to Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum. Containing Severall Poetically Pieces of our Famous English Philosophers, who have Written the Hermetique Mysteries in their owne Ancient Language. Faithfully Collected into one Volume with Annotations thereon by Elias Ashmole, Esq* (London 1652), reprinted, ed. and intro. by Allen G. Debus, New York: Johnson Reprint, 1967, p. xxiv.

God will one day visit them with heavy punishment. But I will leave the magistrates and the jailers to deal with these swindling charlatans. I speak of them only to put you on your guard.⁴

The pretense that alchemical knowledge was esoteric required constant maintenance in the face of such widespread practice and appropriation.

One of Elizabethan London's most prominent evangelists for Paracelsian 'chymical physic' was the alchemist John Hester, who ran a popular distillery at Paul's Wharf and published a stream of translations of Paracelsian and other alchemical works in the 1580s and 90s.⁵ One of Hester's advertising broadsheets (c. 1588) reads:

These Oiles, Waters, Extractions, or Essences, Saltes, and other Compositions; are at Pauls Wharfe ready made to be solde, by IOHN HESTER, practisioner in the arte of Distillation; who will also be ready for a reasonable stipend to instruct any that are desirous to learne the secrets of the same in few days, & c.⁶

Hester was one of many physicians brewing and administering Paracelsian mineral-based medicines to the people of London from the 1580s forward. These practical and medicinal 'chymists' clashed with Galenist barber-surgeons and set off a protracted controversy over medical authority.⁷ They also contributed to the wide dissemination and commercialization of alchemical ideas and practices. Hester's advertisement for ready-made potions and lessons in 'the secrets' lasting a few days is representative of the commercial Paracelsianism. The medical bent of Paracelsianism – in practice, it was much more concerned with perfecting the human body than base metals – came to define alchemy for the general public. Jonson's 1615 court masque *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* features huckster alchemists promising medical rather than metallurgical miracles. Their promises make "[a] poor page o' the larder [...] believe he shall be physician for the

⁴ In: Michael Maier, *The Hermetic Museum, Restored and Enlarged: Most Faithfully Instructing All Disciples of the Soho-Spagyric Art how the Greatest and Truest Medicine of THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE may be Found and Held. Now first done into English from the Latin Original published at Frankfort in the year 1678. Containing Twenty-Two most Celebrated Chemical Tracts in Two Volumes*, ed. by Arthur Edward Waite, vol. 1, New York: Weiser, ⁴1974 (London: Robinson and Watkins, ¹1893), p. 160. The English alchemist Thomas Norton insisted that "this Booke shews to the initiated knowledge, but intensifies the ignorance of the vulgar", Waite, *The Hermetic Museum*, p. 3.

⁵ Deborah Harkness, *The Jewel House. Elizabethan London and the Scientific Revolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 81; Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theater*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, pp. 66 f.

⁶ *British Library Catalogue* C 60 o 6. It has marginalia in the hand of Gabriel Harvey and is dated c. 1588. Cited in Nicholl, *The Chemical Theater* (see note 5), p. 66.

⁷ Harkness, *The Jewel House* (see note 5), pp. 57-96.

household next summer” – no doubt by offering to teach him their secrets in a few easy lessons – “they will give him a quantity of the quintessence, shall serve him to cure kibes, or the mormal o’ the shin, take away the pustules i’ the nose.”⁸ The commercial practice of ‘chymical physic’ was often more at home in storefront pharmacies and dockside distilleries than secret laboratories.

The Alchemist accordingly satirizes alchemy, not by marginalizing it, but by dissolving it in the social and material life of London. Alchemy becomes the “panphysic, or panarchic knowledge” (II.5.15), the abiding logic of the fallen and artificial world of the city. *The Alchemist* is Jonson’s first sustained attempt at incorporating alchemy and its attendant practices into his evolving model of London and the artificial and hybrid forms of life within it. Face is described as just such a creature of artifice when, during the shouting match between conspirators that opens the play, Subtle angrily reminds him that he was only recently “the good / Honest, plain, livery-three-pound-thrum; that kept / Your master’s worship’s house” (I.1.15-17). This drudge was, thanks to Subtle, “translated [into a] suburb-captain” (I.1.19) and “master of the duel” (132), the cunning schemer Face. The alchemist addresses Face as a rebellious homunculus, insufficiently grateful to his creator:

Thou vermin, have I ta’en thee, out of dung,
 So poor, so wretched, when no living thing
 Would keep thee company, but a spider or worse?
 Raised thee from brooms and dust and watering pots?
 Sublimed thee, and exalted thee, and fixed thee
 I’ the third region, called our state of grace?
 Wrought thee to spirit, to quintessence, with pains
 Would twice have won me the philosophers’ work? (I.1.64-71)

Subtle describes Face (formerly Jeremy the butler) as a wan little dust devil, a domestic spirit bound to womanly household tools and left to “converse with cobwebs” (I.1.57) in an empty house. Face’s transformative arc is the inverse of that of Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, who begins the play as a roguish trickster and ends up sweeping the floor.⁹ By equipping Jeremy

⁸ All Jonson Masque citations taken from Ben Jonson, *The Complete Masques*, ed. by Stephen Orgel, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969, here p. 216, V. 64-68.

⁹ Face, like Puck, serves the Queen of Faery. Wendy Wall studies rustic Robin Goodfellow’s domestication as “the arbiter of good housekeeping” (p. 75) and the association of fairy stories with women and domestic servants in: “Why Does Puck Sweep? Fairy Lore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle”, in: *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 52/2001, pp. 67-106. See also Natasha Korda, *Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies. Gender and Property in Early Modern England*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002 for an examination of the development of femininity in relation to moveable household property.

with the trappings of a gallant Subtle claims to have refined Face “out of dung” (I.1.64), both the traditional “horse’s womb” incubating medium for an artificial man¹⁰ and a metaphor for the castoff “ordinary fellowships” (I.1.73) Jeremy previously inhabited:

Never been known, past *equi clibanum*,
The heat of horse-dung, underground, in cellars,
Or an ale-house, darker than deaf John’s: been lost
To all mankind, but laundresses and tapsters,
Had I not been. (I.1.83-87)

Left alone to scheme in the dark, Jeremy’s seclusion in an empty house and pestilential city becomes an unnatural incubation period, requiring Subtle’s skills to come to term. Subtle takes credit for transforming Face into a gallant, raising him from manure into a captain decked out with beard, sword, and fine clothes. This transformation is indicated by both Face’s virtuoso cozenage, and his newfound masculinity and virility. He regards this with a sort of bemused self-fascination, as when he luxuriates in his honey-dripping, hands-wandering description of how Dol will occupy the Spanish Don “with thy drum; / Thy derum, my Dol; thy drum; till he be tame” (III.3.44-45).

Face’s transformation mirrors homunculus recipes like those attributed to Paracelsus.¹¹ The massive collection *De natura rerum*, published in Germany in 1572 by the physician Adam von Bedenstein, and ostensibly written by Paracelsus in 1537, circulated widely in Europe and became a major influence on the medicine and alchemy of its time.¹² The new theory reoriented alchemy from the transmutation of metals toward a pharmaceutical application of alchemical techniques to the creation and perfection of living things.

¹⁰ William R. Newman, “The Homunculus and the Mandrake. Art Aiding Nature versus Art Faking Nature”, in: Jessica Riskin (ed.), *Genesis Redux. Essays in the History and Philosophy of Artificial Life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp. 119-130, here p. 125.

¹¹ Newman, *Promethean Ambitions* (see note 1), p. 203.

¹² The authenticity of *De natura rerum* is disputed. Karl Sudhoff, editor of Paracelsus’ collected works, *Theophrastus von Hohenheim, genannt Paracelsus, Sämtliche Werke*, 1. Abteilung, 14 vols., Munich et al.: Oldenbourg et al., 1922-1933, does not consider the work to be that of Paracelsus, but acknowledges that it may contain genuine material (vol. 11, p. xxxiii). Will-Erich Peuckert questions this rejection in *Theophrastus Paracelsus. Werke*, vol. 5, Basel/ Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1968, p. ix. Kurt Goldammer considers *De natura rerum* authentic, with some reservation: “Paracelsische Eschatologie, zum Verständnis der Anthropologie und Kosmologie Hohenheims I”, in: *Nova Acta Paracelsica* 5/1948, pp. 45-85, here p. 52. Regardless, *De natura rerum* was taken as authentic for much of the late 16th and 17th centuries, and was an important piece of the Paracelsian canon.

Mammon praises Subtle as an “excellent *Paracelsian*” (II.3.230) who “will not hear a word / Of Galen, or his tedious recipes” (II.3.232-33). The Paracelsian alternative to the Aristotelian and Galenic model of matter composed of four elements suggested much wider possibilities for the human manipulation and replication of natural processes than earlier alchemical theories. Like prior accounts of spontaneous generation, *De natura rerum* assumes that certain types of living matter, male and female sperm in particular, need only to putrefy under the proper conditions to generate new life, but argues that natural and artificial processes are essentially identical. Whether they are produced by “nature alone without any art” or

[...] by means of art [...] one could say that all things are born from the earth by means of putrefaction. For putrefaction is the highest step, and the first beginning of generation, and putrefaction takes its origin and beginning from a moist warmth. For the continual moist warmth brings about putrefaction and transmutes all natural things from their first form and essence, as also their powers and virtues. For just as the putrefaction of the stomach turns all food to dung and transmutes it, so also the putrefaction that occurs outside the stomach in a glass transmutes all things from one form to another.¹³

Far from causing decay or degradation, putrefaction, when maintained by constant moist heat, acts upon the powers and virtues inherent to natural things and refines them into new life. Subtle and Surly argue over the efficacy of refining base metals into gold in just these terms of putrefaction.

SURLY But your whole work, no more.
That you should hatch gold in a furnace, sir,
As they do eggs, in Egypt!
SUBTLE Sir, do you
Believe that eggs are hatched so?
SURLY If I should?
SUBTLE Why, I think that the greater miracle.
No egg, but differs from a chicken more,
Than metals in themselves.
SURLY That cannot be.
The egg's ordained by nature to that end:
And is a chicken in potentia.
SUBTLE The same we say of lead, and other metals,
Which would be gold, if they had time. (II.3.126-136)

De natura rerum and other Paracelsian texts move beyond earlier alchemical claims by categorizing both the natural and the artificial generation of life as

¹³ [Pseudo?]-Paracelsus, *De natura rerum*, in: Sudhoff, *Paracelsus Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 11 (see note 12), p. 312. Translation from Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, (see note 1), p. 200.

the result of warm, moist putrefaction. Whether it happens in womb or a flask, the essential process is the same.¹⁴

The treatise then takes a further step, arguing that the alchemist can manage putrefaction to achieve feats that nature cannot. Living things can be incinerated and then restored in glass flasks, their toxic femininity burned away, revealing the pure masculine substance beneath. The pinnacle of art is the creation of artificial human life:

We must now by no means forget the generation of homunculi. For there is something to it, although it has been kept in great secrecy and kept hidden up to now, and there was not a little doubt and question among the old philosophers whether it even be possible to nature and art that a man can be born outside the female body and a natural mother. I give this answer – that it is by no means opposed to the spagyric art and to nature, but that it is indeed possible. But how this should happen and proceed – its process is thus – that the sperm of a man be putrefied by itself in a cucurbit for forty days with the highest degree of putrefaction in a horses' womb, or at least so long that it comes to life and moves itself, and stirs, which is easily observed. After this time, it will look something like a man, but transparent, without a body. If, after this, it be fed wisely with the Arcanum of human blood and be nourished for up to forty weeks, and be kept in the even heat of the horses' womb, a living human child grows therefrom, with all its members like another child, which is born of woman but is much smaller.¹⁵

The author of *De natura rerum* introduces the homunculus in the framework of the traditional question of the limits of human art. This creature, crafted by the alchemist from male seed without any corrupt feminine matter, is meant, in William Newman's words, to "[...] serve as a magnification of the intellectual and heroic virtues of masculinity [...]. From the perspective of pseudo-Paracelsus, the homunculus is [...] the distilled essence of masculinity, concentrated and purified of its material dross."¹⁶ The homunculus first

¹⁴ The parity of artificial and natural forms of heat can be traced back to the alchemical reading of a passage in Aristotle's *Meteorology*, arguing that in heating liquids "it makes no difference whether it takes place in an artificial or a natural vessel" (IV 3 381a9-12). Aristotle, *Meteorologica*, ed. and trans. by Henry Desmond Pritchard Lee, Cambridge, (MA)/ London: Heinemann/Harvard University Press, 1952. Bacon wrote in a similar vein in *De Augmentis*, arguing that "the artificial does not differ from the natural in form or essence, but only in the efficient". *The Works of Francis Bacon, Baron of Verulam, Viscount St. Albans, and Lord High Chancellor of England*, ed. by James Spedding, Robert L. Ellis, and Douglas D. Heath, vol. 4 (1872), New York 1968 (Reprint) (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann/Holzboog, 1986), p. 294.

¹⁵ Paracelsus, *De natura rerum* (see note 13), p. 346. Translation in Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, (see note 1), p. 203.

¹⁶ Newman, *Promethean Ambitions* (see note 1), pp. 203 f. The description of homunculus-making shortly follows *De natura rerum*'s account of the generation of a basilisk from menstrual blood sealed in a flask and incubated in dung. The resulting creature "[...] has the poison in its glance and eyes. It must be known, then, that it has such a

takes shape as something small, translucent, and almost bodiless. If it grows to adulthood, *De natura rerum* boasts that the homunculus will be able to defeat its enemies with “great, forceful victory” and know “all hidden and secret things”.¹⁷

Jonson uses this model of the homunculus – artificial, masculine, fiercely intelligent, born bearing secret knowledge – to create a sublimed version of the dramatic character, the master actor Face.¹⁸ Subtle’s invention, Face oscillates between the *familiaris* role of Lungs, the alchemist’s loyal apprentice, and Don Face the *servus fugitivus*, a “son[] of sword and hazard” (II.1.18) who is coming to resent his creator. As their partnership starts to fracture over Dame Pliant, Subtle tells himself “we must keep Face in awe, / Or he will overlook us like a tyrant” (IV.3.18-19). He is all too aware of the power his new creation possesses. Homunculi come into the world so gifted because, like the artificial humans of the stage, “[...] they receive their life from art, through art they receive their body, flesh, bone, and blood. Through art they are born, and therefore art is embodied and inborn in them, and they need learn it from no one.”¹⁹

In *The Alchemist*, this innate knowledge takes the form of encyclopedic social intelligence. Speaking to every man in his own language, Face can knowledgeably praise Druggier’s unadulterated tobacco while listing the various indignities tobacconists impose on the herb (I.3.23-31); sum up Dapper’s life in a few well-chosen lines (I.2.49-58); and woo Kastril with an exhaustively detailed description of the fine sheets, wine, and silverware he would enjoy as a city gallant (III.4.55-74). This virtuosity was *in potentia* in Jeremy, a storehouse of knowledge passively absorbed during a life of domestic service, but it took Subtle’s tending to realize it.

characteristic and origin from impure [i.e. menstruating] women, as was said above. For the basilisk grows and is born out of and from the greatest impurity of women, from the menses and the blood of the sperm.” (Paracelsus, *De natura rerum* [see note 13], p. 315, in Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, [see note 1], p. 202.) Forensic scientists who examined Paracelsus’ remains in 1990 found that his pelvis was extraordinarily wide, indicating a high probability of intersexuality. This, and descriptions of Paracelsus as castrated, led the examiners to suggest that Paracelsus was either a genetic male with pseudohermaphroditism or a genetic female with androgenital syndrome (Newman, *Promethean Ambitions* [see note 1], pp. 196 f.). The possibility that Paracelsus may have been intersexed casts a new light on his misogyny and disgust with sexual intercourse.

¹⁷ Paracelsus, *De natura rerum* (see note 13), pp. 316 f. Translation in Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, (see note 1), p. 204.

¹⁸ One can imagine a production of *The Alchemist* that plays on Face’s homunculi aspects by casting a very short and nimble actor.

¹⁹ Paracelsus, *De natura rerum* (see note 13), p. 317.

Face, transformed from a clean-shaven servant to a pimp with modish beard, is a canny redefinition of the Paracelsian homunculus, a passive, feminine, submissive creature transformed into a mercurial manipulator who can juggle multiple schemes and come out on top when his creator's works explode. We can read *The Alchemist* along the lines of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* or Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, as the tale of a magus and his willful familiar(s), but this is a magus play where the magic arises from the things that go into *Mercury Vindicated's* roguish "fencer i' the mathematics" (139 f.): "salt of confederacy, a pound of adventure, a grain of skill, and a drop of truth" (145 f.).²⁰ Subtle is a man-maker whose invention is chafing against its constraints. New characters in this fallen world are born already in rebellion, despite the best efforts of their creators to keep them in line, because the creators themselves are already implicated in and compromised by the vulgar networks of material circulation and transformation that enable their art. Face makes this dependence clear, reminding Subtle that he found him

[...] at Pie Corner

Taking your meal of steam in, from cooks' stalls,
Where, like the father of hunger, you did walk
Piteously costive, with your pinched-horn-nose,
And your complexion, of the Roman wash,
Stuck full of black and melancholic worms,
Like powder-corns, shot, at the artillery yard. (I.1.25-31)

Like Bobadill in *Every Man in His Humour*, forgoing the breakfast he cannot afford in favor of a puff from his pipe, Subtle was an impoverished specter trying to subsist on air. Like Face, Subtle is raised "from dunghills" (I.1.34), where he scavenged for rags in threadbare clothes "[t]hat scarce would cover your no-buttocks" (I.1.37).²¹ Poverty and isolation are the banes that most vex the characters in Jonson's city comedies and Subtle and Face need each other to overcome them. The desire for a bigger society, to trade a straitened social space for a broad one, is widely shared by the characters of *The Alche-*

²⁰ David Lucking reads Subtle as such a magus, and examines the interplay between *The Alchemist* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in "Carrying Tempest in his Hand and Voice. The Figure of the Magician in Jonson and Shakespeare", in: *English Studies* 4/2004, pp. 297-310.

²¹ The poverty, wretchedness, and foul smell of alchemists are tropes that go back at least as far as Chaucer's *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. In *Terrors of the Night* (1594) Thomas Nashe describes a Paracelsian physician who begins his rise to social prominence by "rak[ing] some dunghill for a few durtie boxes and plaisters", in: *The Works of Thomas Nashe* (1904-1910), reprinted, ed. by Ronald B. McKerrow, vol. 1, Oxford: Blackwell, 1958, pp. 363-366.

mist and recognition (or planting) of this desire in others prompts much of the play's action.

This play's ending might suggest that Face is returned to his previous lowly state and is left to bear the brunt of his master's wrath, but *The Alchemist* avoids such an outcome. Face is not just the waste that remains, but the ironically sublimed and perfected creature of art produced by dramatic experimentation. Face delivers on the unrealized promises of Subtle and countless other alchemists. He restores his old master to youth, supplies him with riches and young wife, and turns his mind to pleasure and ease. A more modest version of Mammon's plan to live in utter luxury with a golden bride and Lungs as his servant is realized by Lovewit.

But while Mammon, in describing his seraglio, promised "I'll geld you Lungs" (II.2.34), Lovewit's Face, though shaved, remains the potent creature of art he has been. Making his appeal to the crowd, Face admits that "My part fell a little in this last scene, / Yet 'twas decorum" (V.5.158). Instead of making a plea for mercy, Face gloats that he has disentangled himself from all the schemers and gulls that would use him. When he calls the audience "my country", (V.5.163) he speaks not as the accused on trial, but as a confident creature of the man-made second nature they inhabit. Jingling his ill-gotten gold in his hand, Face offers to entertain the audience again to further lighten their purses and those of the next batch of gulls to come to Lovewit's house. Face stands as an example of the success of artifice, inviting the audience to become further enmeshed in his art.

In *The Alchemist*, Jonson uses Paracelsian ideas to sketch a debased and artificial world. Face serves as the perverse embodiment of this fallen world, the "faeces, ashes" (IV.5.31) left behind when the lab blows up and the experiment is complete. Subtle promised to make a new world in his workshop, and he does, a world turned upside down where the cunning servant and lowly waste product wins the day. A new human being is made, and he is a creature of ashes and dung, the digested product of a second nature that can only putrefy what it is given.

But this putrefaction is also a refinement. Jonson appropriates technical and commercial material practices in order to both satirize their practitioners and put them to use as the foundation of his own art. Just as a canny performance saves Face from disaster and allows his co-conspirators to escape, Jonson's appropriation of alchemical practices and subordination of them to the theater refines such base material. *The Alchemist* ends with the argument that theatre, not alchemy, is the true science of artificial life, a means of creating and refining artificial humans who will not flail for a bit and then collapse, like a non-viable homunculus, but figures who will endure. Jonson leaves us with the assurance that Face is a homunculus with a future, a crea-

ture of art who knows the secrets of the city and its people, and who will continue to alchemize gold from playgoers' pockets.

Justin Kolb
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater
Dept. of Languages and Literature
800 W. Main St.
Whitewater, WI 53190
USA
justinbarneskolb@gmail.com