

Study of ben jonsons the alchemist english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



" If his dreams last, he'll turn the age to gold." (I. iv. 35)The Alchemist one of Ben Jonson's greatest comedies and representatives of Jacobean Drama was labeled by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as having " one of the three most perfect plots in literature". It is famous for its funny events, constant transformations of identities, and the duping of gullible characters by other clever ones. The notion of identity in this play needs contemplation, and this essay tries to find traces of the French theorist, Jacques Lacan's (1901-1981) theories concerning identity and its relationship to language and action in this comedy. Also the essay wants to ponder on the notion of man's desire and its link to Lacanian the Real Stage which can never happen for human beings who feel themselves constantly in the lack of this stage. The play starts in a mansion in London which is in absence of its master, Lovewit, who has departed to Kent to be safe from the Plague. The housekeeper, Jeremy, acting out as a captain Face, with the aid of two of his friends, Subtle, a charlatan, performing as an alchemist and Dol also in the role of a lady while in reality a prostitute; has turned the house into a domain of their conceit. The tripartite change their identities and play and act out roles in order to make benefit and earn money by deceiving some foolish clients who believe Subtle is a doctor in power of the art of alchemy and thus able to transmute metal into gold. As a result humorous and entertaining consequences start happening, while at the same time Jonson mocks many social classes of 17th century London such as the Puritans whose greed of money is even more excessive or nobilities like Kastil, and his widowed sister who came to the house in search of a husband and, on the other hand, Lovewit the master of the house who marries this woman because of her money. As soon as the

play starts the audience understands the chaotic situation. The master of the house, the supposedly real practitioner of power, is absent, and like a typical Renaissance and Jacobean drama with the absence of power, chaos has turned up. The chaos is shown through the shifting and altering of identities mostly practiced by Face, Subtle, and Dol who are in pretention; the hierarchical boundaries are broken down and servants are in the place of masters, masters in the place of clients, and we " have Dol Common for a great lady" (IV. i. 90) Therefore since identities are understood through appearance, realities are subverted and identities are performed and thus through performed identities deception, con, and fraud has turned up. But the reader may ask what the significance of performed identities is? In other words why individuals try to act out their subjectivity? According to Lacan's theories people act out their identities and pretend to be the persons who the other characters desire them to be. That is to say in Lacan's study of the subjection of the infant, in the mirror stage the child grasps herself in the mirror as an independent subject who is divided and separated from the Other whom up to now for her was her mother. She understands that she is separated from her mother and from the world so this separation hints her about her lacks. She realizes that in order to construct his subjectivity she is in need of the Other or the others to define her and as a result she feels the desire to define herself according to the Other's desires. Thus, she would not be a complete subject, if she does not know anything about the desire of the Other. In *The Alchemist*, as Ann Barton discusses in her book *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, " people of all classes and temperaments make their way to Subtle's consulting rooms because they think that somehow he can make

their lives better, because they have become dissatisfied with what they are" (Barton 138). Contrary to Shakespearean characters, Jonson's characters themselves " yearn to be changed" since they " are not content with the paltry dimensions of their habitual lives and selves" (ibid 138). To put in Lacanian terms they are totally lead by their own desires. It is their desire—which here is pictured by Jonson as ugly, material desire and greed for money and gold—that not only guides them towards Subtle but also creates Subtle. In fact as Lacan discusses about the role of desire in the realm of language and subjection "[w]e are born into language—the language through which the desires of others are articulated and through which we are forced to articulate our own desire" (Homer 44). According to Lacan we want to be objects of the Other's desires and our identities are shaped by the Other's desires just as the alchemist's identity is created out of the other naïve characters' desires. As long as there are dupes like Dapper, Mammon, Drugger, Tribulation, and Ananias with their illusory hunger of turning metal into gold, inevitably individuals like Subtle are created as well. Not only the three cheaters are in lack of the fools to be identified, but also the fools are in need of the frauds: as was mentioned earlier they themselves are ready and eager to be deceived since they are against the rationalities of reality and are in search of the dreams of their unconsciousness and this desire is fulfilled only through false identities of a non-existent alchemist, a fake captain and a " Queen of Faery". As a result since " their aspirations are restricted by the very limitations of intellect and social position from which they want to escape. This is why they need Face and Subtle, masters of illusion who can liberate and objectify their inchoate feelings of restriction

and discontent. (Barton 138)". Their greed of gold can be labeled as their desire that revealed their lack and therefore their need towards Subtle and his colleagues in order to be defined as a winner of gambles (Dapper), as a savior (Mammon), and as devoted Puritans (Tribulation, and Ananias). In this chaotic world that is pictured in the house the people yearn for an ideal status brought by alchemy; in fact alchemy can be considered as the real desire, as the lack that individuals feel in order to identify themselves and as the Other whom individuals yearn to be. Alchemy is the art that brings order and unity and simultaneously the complete pleasures and contentment of what Lacan terms as the Real Stage in which persons were born into and in which they were united with the mother, and a perfect happy, unified world was experienced by the infant. But the point stressed by Lacan is that human beings can never return to this ideal stage so that it is an illusory condition for subjects and is created only by people's desires and can only happen in people's dreams. The desire for such a world is shown through idealistic ambitions of Epicure Mammon, who wants to change the world into a utopia by turning everything into gold. With the power of alchemy he wants " to enrich his friends, free England from the plague, restore the aged to youth, and cure 'all diseases, comming of all causes' " (Barton 140). Besides, by turning any metal into pure gold he is set to remove any separation and differentiation among objects i. e. no lead and silver and all metals to be changed to the highest and noblest of metals. What he is yearning to accomplish is out of the capability of human being; an idealistic condition which Lacan calls the Real Stage, and which can never be achieved, just as the world Mammon describes is out of reach and just as

turning metal into gold is. MAMMON. ...He that has once the flower of the sun, The perfect ruby, which we call elixir, Not only can do that, but by its virtue Can confer honour, love, respect, long life, Give safety, valour: yea, and victory, To whom he will. In eight-and-twenty days, I'll make an old man, of fourscore, a child. (II. i. 38) Apart from appearance, Subtle uses the Other's language. It is not hard to find out that in this play changed identities are followed by changed language. Language is a device, an instrument that shapes identities. The person in power is Subtle, the alchemist, and it is his ability in words that equips him with power. He manages in what way to handle the situation and in what way to fool the clients according to their greedy ambitions. It is the power of his words that makes his clients to believe that he really is an alchemist. Although Face is the one who provides them the place to perform, when it comes to the domains of language he is not that much powerful as Subtle is. To give an example, in the first scene during their quarrel, Subtle burst out saying that it was he who taught Face the art of language: SUBTLEhave 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 wat'ring pots? Sublimed thee, and exalted thee, and fixed thee l'the third region, called our state of grace? Wrought thee to spirit, to quintessence, with pains Would twice have won me the philosophers' work? Put thee in words, and fashion? Made thee fit For more than ordinary fellowships? Given thee thy oaths, thy quarrelling dimensions? Thy rules, to cheat at horse-race, cockpit, cards, Dice, or whatever gallant tincture else? Made thee a second, in mine own great art? (I. i. 17) In fact it is in language that Subtle is created as a different subject, i.

e. an alchemist. This reflects in one way or another Lacan's theory that "Language is not so much to be seen as our means of expression but as the medium through which and in which our very identity is structured.... Language creates us as it creates the world around us. This is not to 'suggest' that things do not exist, but rather that it is only through language that materiality becomes meaningful" (Halstead 197). To put it in other words, identities are created in language, and through language individuals are shaped just as Subtle, creates the identity of an alchemist by talking like an alchemist. On the other hand, Jeremy and Dol build up a " Captain" and a " Lady" through the shift of language. For instance a shift of language is vivid in Dol's speech, the first extract is taken from Act I in which Dol is quarrelling with her two colleagues: DOL. And you, sir, with your menstrue, gather it up.'Sdeath, you abominable pair of stinkards, Leave off your barking, and grow one again, Or, by the light that shines, I'll cut your throats. I'll not be made a prey unto the marshalFor ne'er a snarling dog-bolt o'you both. (I. i. 19)And this quotation is uttered when she is playing her role as a lady in front of Mammon: DOL. Sir, althoughWe may be said to want the gilt and trappings, The dress of honour; yet we strive to keepThe seeds, and the materials. (IV. i. 91)Another example that can be look at as the role of language in construction of identity is Surly's transformation into a Spaniard; first of all let us begin with the fact that he is the only character who does not believe in Subtle's words and his promise of alchemy from the very beginning. He rudely questions and devalues the promises of the supposed alchemist " Faith, I have a humour, I would not willingly be gulled. Your stone Cannot transmute me" (II. i. 39). Just as Barton saysSurly is a man impatient

with pretence, someone who declines to be taken in. A rationalist from the start, he believes neither in Mammon's grandiose visions nor in the promises of Subtle. He identifies Dol Common quite accurately as a whore, at first sight, although Mammon tries to persuade him that he actually knows her ladyship's noble brother, and has the whole, dignified family history lodged somewhere in the back of his mind. As Subtle and Mammon fill the air with brightly coloured alchemical terms, Surly's observations are caustic. He cannot resist trying to expose the charlatans for what they are (Barton 146). In scene three of Act IV, it is Surly who appears in a fake disguise, "like a Spaniard", and this time Subtle and Face are totally deceived since Surly's language has completely changed to Spanish. Another language brings another identity; Subtle and Face do not doubt him and later when they understand that they have been fooled they get shocked. Surly's knowledge of the Spanish language enables him to discover about Subtle and Face's charlatanism. Taking him as a Spanish man, Subtle and Face speak in English in front of him revealing their true identity and their real intentions, while Surly is listening to them. They do not understand what Surly is saying in Spanish and their lack of understanding in this language disarms them and their power is taken away and so their plan is revealed.

SURLY. Entiendo. SUBTLE. Do you intend it? So do we, dear Don. Have you brought pistols? or portagues? My solemn Don? Dost thou feel any? FACE, {he feels his pockets) Full. SUBTLE. You shall be emptied, Don; pumped, and drawnDry, as they say. FACE . Milked, in troth, sweet Don. SUBTLE. See all the monsters; the great lion of all, Don. SURLY. Con licencia, sepuede ver a esta senora? SUBTLE. What talks he now? F ACE . O'the senora. (IV. iii.

101)The two rascals make fun of the Spanish man whom they regard is out of the realm of language and thus unable to recognize their words, which ironically is vice versa. To sum up, the notion of language is highlighted in this play in its comical way to show that language is not separated from people's subjectivity and that as Lacan mentions individuals are constructed within language. So that language gives power and it is the power of language that helps Subtle and his colleagues to abuse other characters. Since the play is about the power of alchemy and turning base metal into gold, metaphorically we can assume that the real alchemy is that of the language that makes identities out of bodies, that the elixir of language can be more powerful than that of the Philosopher's Stone.