

Gulls onstage, and in  
the audience:  
perspective in the  
alchemist



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“ The gulls in the alchemist do not deserve wealth so much as a perfected image of themselves.”

There are two groups of gulls in *The Alchemist*; on the evidence of Jonson's commentary on his own work, he presented the image that the gulled characters deserved neither of two typical narrative rewards (namely, wealth and self-refinement) unless they would undergo significant changes.

Naturally, we have our Dapper, Druggier, and Mammon in the early acts of the play as the standard “ gulls” or dupes within Jonson's satiric action.

However, arguably the real gulls in *The Alchemist* are the paying audience members themselves, and Jonson encourages the audience's mental participation in the venture of the play in a manner that creates exactly this ironic relationship.

Why are the audience members gulls? Surely they would think themselves intelligent enough not to be tricked – after all, the wealthy would have paid for their shilling seat in the Blackfriars theatre. But as Jonson relates to the audience in the prologue, ‘ fortune favours fools,’ suggesting the wealthy audience to be fools themselves. As promoted in ‘ To the Reader’ we may be the ‘ reader,’ but we may not also be the ‘ understander,’ of Jonson's work. Material wealth does not equate to mental wealth. Jonson himself could be compared to Subtle, filling his dialogue with bombast in order to impress the listener, even if it is not understood. Recall Subtle's speeches to the clients, especially those given to Mammon in Act 2 Scene 2, wherein we learn that Subtle (or rather Jonson) is acutely aware of the base principles of what was considered practical alchemy. ‘ Hermaphroditus,’ of the elements and soul (for attachment to the genders of the physical would not result in the

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balance of mind required to discover the stone) and the hermaphroditic child from the 'mercurial,' water were theories produced by contemporary alchemists. Indeed, even when Subtle is unobserved in the first scene, he mentions with gravity his 'philosopher's work,' and Face admits that Subtle conducts 'alchemy and algebra,' in addition to his cozening. Subtle merely adds aggrandizement to the doctrines to make up for his lack of specific expertise and impress the onlooker - can we not say Jonson does the same? His own interpretation and observation of low London society is given a mask and displayed as farce - because an interesting farce will drive in the most customers.

The comparison of Jonson to Subtle is key to this reading and hinted at by Jonson himself. Through writing *The Alchemist*, Jonson hopes to 'better men,' (Prologue) - one of the goals of the alchemist is for the audience to see some of their own qualities reflected in the characters present. Criticism of *The Alchemist* often highlights the familiar tropes to which the characters adhere. From the offset, as soon as we hear the name 'Druggier,' or 'Face,' we know what the role of these characters shall be. But these characters are perfected, purified versions of real human qualities. Oscar Wilde praised the use of what he called Jonson's 'ready-made,' characters, writing of them 'they are in no sense abstractions, they are types... true to nature.' They are merely an extreme variant of individuals we might observe in London. By having the ready-made characters we are already familiar with, rather than more outlandish unimaginable ones, we are able to see some truth in their words, and relate their actions to our real-world experiences. Like an alchemist, Jonson in the prologue tells the audience he wishes to 'cure,'

them of their vices, and calls his characters 'fair correctives.' Therefore, we could consider the conned gulls in the play the perfected, distilled image of the vices of the audience - the true gulls. In a way, this is Jonson's *Mousetrap*, put on with characters of vice, used to force the audience to expose and contemplate upon their own follies. Yet Jonson knows that his goals may not be achieved, and 'the doers may see, and yet not own,' their black deeds.

Metatheatricality was one of Jonson's favoured techniques - especially the cozening of a critical audience. Take the great reveal in *Epicene* - if a viewer was fooled, and never guessed *Epicene* to be male it shows they would be so willing to believe in the constructed norms of society, rather than what was clearly in front of their face. *The Alchemist* is no different, it forces the audience to question their own conduct through observing a perfected image of their own potential follies. My only query would be the of reception in regard to these techniques in the 17th Century, where there was but a small market for subtle plays. They were seen as low enough to be performed mostly outside the London police's jurisdiction and drama was usually banned in Oxford (although observer Henry Jackson there noted that the Oxford premiere of *The Alchemist* was packed). I wonder whether most of the viewers were not 'understanders,' and took *The Alchemist* at face value.

Let us contemplate Jonson's fictional gulls and ask what they, in the view of the 'judging audience,' deserve, and whether we ought to feel sympathetic towards them. Indeed, because the characters are ready-made and often generalised visions of a type of human, we are able to see ourselves in them.

However, this can work two ways. Not only can it incite a feeling of guilt at <https://assignbuster.com/gulls-onstage-and-in-the-audience-perspective-in-the-alchemist/>

our own vices, but it gives us a greater propensity for sympathy towards them, and there is one universal desire that any viewer of *The Alchemist* shares with the gulls: the lust for escapism. Dapper tells Face he 'shall leave the law,' once he has the stone, and throws his life into gaming. Can it not be said this man is deeply unsatisfied with his life, and only wishes for a second chance to leave a hastily-chosen profession? Druggier claims to be 'a young beginner,' and is clueless as what to do with his new shop. Does he not seek to utilise Subtle's service in order to avoid the heavy responsibility of owning the store? And before these characters, the audience sit. They have paid to engage themselves in witnessing an imagined world forged with words in order to to forget about their own sufferings.

Epicure Mammon may especially be hard to direct sympathy towards, 'covetous,' and full of desire for 'a list of wives and concubines.' Arguably, however, within all of Mammon's listed 'lusts,' it is easiest to see one of our own. Within Mammon's monologues to Face in Act II Scene II, he touches upon each one of the seven deadly sins in turn. Unlike the other gulls, his desire is not singular, and the more numerous his fantasies, the more likely one is to strike a chord within an audience member. The envy of another man's 'sublim'd pure wife,' or the feeling of inferiority towards the 'town stallions,' could potentially be real conundrums that cause the viewer to reconsider their sinful thoughts. Most of all, I believe it important to consider the purpose of Mammon's dreams. These are plans that he has clearly spent much of his free time contriving, with such intricate details as the exact jewels he wishes to have ('emeralds, sapphires, hyacinths and rubies') right down to the fans he would like to be cooled with ('of ostrich tails... made of

plume'). But why does Mammon want all this? It is because he needs a place 'to loose our selves in.' To forget who he really is. To escape from the real world and live in a realm of pleasure. What man, besides one at unease, would attend to his fantasies with such alacrity, unless he required these imaginings to cope with the burdens of the real world? From his desire to make men 'eunuchs,' and bed 'fifty a night,' evidently we infer Mammon feels despair and dissatisfaction in romance. Just like Mammon, the audience attends the theatre to find a place to lose themselves in, and fix their minds on a distracting tale.

Conversely, it is against Jonson's desire that we fall into the seductive throes of the dreaming escapist. Indeed, it is not his objective to have us 'wish away,' our fortunes during this play (prologue). Because if we utilise *The Alchemist* to fulfil our urges for a flight from reality, we are no better than the gulls who come to Lovewit's house asking for a brewed solution to their troubles. By acting as our Subtle, Jonson tries to take our destiny into his hands, and instead of fooling us, he tries to correct us by example.

Concerning the gulls themselves, the discussed statement is less illuminating. One could argue that the desires the gulls deserve least would be wealth and a perfected image of themselves, as if we are to agree with Jonson's own sentiments in the prologue. Fortune only 'favours fools,' and is hardly a blessing to be deserved. And as for the perfected image? one must achieve a perfected image of oneself through the recognition of one's own flaws as opposed to a transformation brought about by another.

The *Alchemist* is an inversion of the traditional fable as it does not contain omniscient moralisation to remind us of what behaviours are undesirable and <https://assignbuster.com/gulls-onstage-and-in-the-audience-perspective-in-the-alchemist/>

should be corrected – instead Jonson challenges us to seek out and observe our own flaws within his characters. This could indeed only work if the characters are ready-made and do not have traits far-removed from the realm of plausibility. Therefore, if Jonson were not to use stock characters, it could undermine the moralising potential of his work. Evidently, the audience, as gulls deserve above all a chance to strive towards a more perfected, ethical version of themselves.