

Can identity be self-  
created?:  
characterization in  
'the alchemist' and  
'marriage-...



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Identity is critical for our understanding of our everyday interactions with others. It refers to who we are and how we appear in a society. Who we fundamentally are, our personal identity, is based on intrinsic qualities that define us, such as facts about us, our genetics and personality, involving our actions and what we say. Our identity is also defined by the perceptions that other people have from ourselves. I believe identity is multiple, it refers to what define us as a person, and is therefore inseparable from how we are seen by others. Identity is dual: it is our personal identity, what we fundamentally are and cannot be detached from how we appear in society, our social identity.[1]By considering the concept of identity's dual characteristics, its multiplicity and relative stableness as well as its social implications, I will present the extent of control we have over creating our own identity. Asking if identity can be self created is tantamount to asking whether we have control over who we are and how people see us. While exploring how identities are created by characters in *The Alchemist*, and *Marriage-a-la-mode*, I will argue that if we can partially create and control our own identity, it cannot be created without others. Finally, we find ourselves with very few control over who we are and how we are socially perceived. Our identity is characterized by how we look and present ourselves to the world. Thus, we do have some control over how we appear to the world since we choose our looks, clothes and accessories that can become our trademark. In that way, we influence people's perception of us and therefore create our own identity.

In the *Alchemist*, Face, Subtle, Dol Common and Surly have a relative control over their identities since they decide to adopt new ones. They disguise

themselves, changing temporarily their original identity, presenting themselves to have control over who they are and how they appear to others. Other characters are totally fooled by their new appearances and are easily deceived. Subtle becomes Doctor Subtle and Face a captain or a servant as Lungs '[Enter Face, in a Captain's uniform]'.<sup>[2]</sup> Face was once 'the good, honest, plain livery-three-pound-thrum that kept [his] master lodgings'.<sup>[3]</sup> Dapper, along with Mammon, and Druggler are tricked into believing these are their true identities and are easily conned. Dol Common also takes up the absurd identity of The Queen of Faery with Dapper, and the one of a mad scholar with Mammon. She modifies her appearance by adopting corresponding disguises necessitating 'a tire' for one and to be 'richly dressed' for the other. Likewise, Surly adopts the identity of a Spaniard to discover the truth behind the conmen's system [Enter Surly, in his Spanish costume].<sup>[4]</sup> In Dryden's *Marriage-à-la-mode*, characters also adopt disguises in order to hide and therefore control their identities. Doralice and Palamede, along with Rodophil and Melantha, take advantage of a masquerade to disguise themselves in order to enjoy their respective lovers in secrecy though 'I believe it was invented first by some jealous lover, to discover the haunts of his jilting mistress'.<sup>[5]</sup> While Rodophil and Palamede comically wear visor masks, Melantha and Doralice disguised as boys, create their identity themselves to fulfil their goal while successfully tricking others. As Palamede remarks 'to go unknown is the next degree to going invisible' (III. i. 129). Doralice and Melantha's disguises are so elaborate that even their lovers do not recognize them at first 'Doralice in man's habit' (IV. i. 190). 'Now must I be troubled with this young rogue' (IV. i. 210). Similarly, as clothes, jewels are insightful about their owner's identity. Thus, some <https://assignbuster.com/can-identity-be-self-created-characterization-in-the-chemist-and-marriage-a-la-mode/>

jewels permitted Polymadas to recognize the letter left by his runaway wife as hers '[...] some jewel of a vast price [...] he knew had been his wife's' (I. i289). Likewise, Argaeleon recognizes Palmyra by her outfit 'I cannot be deceived; that is the princess; One of her maids betrayed the habit to me' (IV. ii. 40). Through disguise, one is able to control the image people have of us. Indeed, Leonidas chose to disguise himself to hide from others his true identity as Palmyra's lover ' My dear Palmyra, many eyes observe me, / And I have thoughts so tender, that I cannot In public speak them to you' (I. i. 455). Thus, by controlling one's appearance through looks or disguises, we are able to control and create our identity which is malleable and can be multiple. Moreover, our identity can be self-created through the language we decide to use. Thus, to sustain his invented identity as a doctor, Subtle uses a scientific language that is not usually his. Indeed, the opening presents Subtle's usual language ' I fart at thee', contrasting with the erudite language he uses as a doctor ' By a rule, captain, in metoposcopy, which I do work by'.<sup>[6]</sup> Subtle's language is adjusted according to the persons he finds himself with. He presents his doubtful knowledge through a logorrhea aiming at disturbing his clients. Indeed, he frightens Ananias with a shower of unintelligible words ' Heathen! You knipper-doling? Is Ars sacra, Or chrysopeia, or spagyrica, Or the pamphysic, or panarchic knowledge, A heathen language?'.<sup>[7]</sup> He wisely warns Mammon in order to sustain his legitimacy as an eminent doctor '[t]his argues something, worthy of a fear / Of importune and carnal appetite. / Take heed you do not cause the blessing leave you, / with your ungovern'd haste'.<sup>[8]</sup> Similarly, Surly adopts a new language in order to perfect his identity as a Spaniard ' Por el amor de dios, que es esto que se tarda?'.<sup>[9]</sup> Through his ironical interventions, Surly

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creates his identity as 'the self-proclaimed skeptical' and doubtful comic character who 'would not willingly be gulled' and finds the conmen promises 'somewhat costive of belief'.<sup>[10]</sup> Dol creates her identity by acting as a scholar '[b]lood we boast none, sir, a poor baron's daughter',<sup>[11]</sup> and using a language that she does not use normally 'That Perdiccas and Antigonus were slain, / the two that stood, Seleuc' and Ptolomy'.<sup>[12]</sup> Kaastrill, also sustain his identity as a quarrelling boy by using a certain insulting or threatening language 'Or by this hand I'll maul you'.<sup>[13]</sup> Language is at the heart of the construction of one's identity in *Marriage-à-la mode* as well. Indeed, Melantha, though a 'town-lady', creates her identity as a fashionable lady of the court by using French words. Her personality is shaped by her language 'Amour sounds better' (II. i. 16). As Subtle, she uses extensively a special idiom in order to impress others. Moreover, lovers' identities are sustained by the use of courtly words. Indeed, Palamede courts Doralice by flattering her in an attempt to seduce her 'you look so killingly that I should be mute with wonder' (I. i. 32). Here, the lack of words that Palamede would suffer supports his identity as a sincere lover. Moreover, Polymadas notices in Hermogene's use of language some indication about his true identity 'He talks too like a man that knew the world to have been long a peasant' (I. i. 355). Thus, language and identity are closely related. By having control over one's language, we have control over who we are and how we appear in society. Some interpretations of human nature and identity asserts that our actions determine significantly what we are. Indeed, the characters' identities in *The Alchemist* are closely related to what they do. Subtle, Dol Common and Face's identities are shaped by their activities as conmen.

Though controlling their identity through disguise, their true nature is

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disclosed at the end of the play by the gulls ' Rogues, Cozeners, imposters, bawds!'. [14] This ambivalence between the conmen's created identity and their true identity is revealed in Surly's exclamation ' This is a new Face'. [15] Indeed, Captain Face is the created identity of Jeremy Butler. By a metonymy, ' Face' stands as Jeremy's true identity, since our identity is also defined by our 'visage'. There is a triple meaning in his remark. If Face's oldest and original identity is the one of Jeremy Butler, Jeremy Butler's recovered identity replace his constructed one as Captain Face. This remark is particularly significant since Face's true identity, and therefore the oldest one rather than the newest, was defined by his occupation as Lovewit's servant. Thus, Surly reveals that ambivalence between Face's real identity and his constructed one. The conmen true identity is finally revealed through the discovery of the criminal nature of their actions ' That are birding in men's purses'. [16] Moreover, Surly's creates his own identity as the ' self-proclaimed skeptic' through his actions. [17] He tried to unveil the criminal nature of the conmen's action through disguise ' I am a gentleman come here disguised / Only to find the knaveries of this citadel;'. [18] As a picaresque character, his noble motives are ridiculously dismissed by a reversal of situation. In *Marriage-à-la-mode*, Polymadas' identity is defined by his past actions as the usurper of the rightful King. Though ruling his kingdom, his actions cannot be detached from his actual identity. His wife, fled with Eubulus during the ' coup'. Her action, significant for her identity as a virtuous lady, is praised by Artemis ' how I admire her virtue!' (I. i. 284). Thus, character's actions influence significantly the image that other characters have of them. Character's actions shape their respective identities in a way that is fully controllable by themselves. If characters can ' <https://assignbuster.com/can-identity-be-self-created-characterization-in-the-chemist-and-marriage-a-la-mode/>

self-create' their identities through control over their appearances, language and actions, they still rely on each other to create such identities: they do not have control over other characters' opinion and cannot fully create alone their identities. The three conmen in *The Alchemist*, sustain their identities thank to each other's help. Doing the actions which contribute to their activities as conmen require organization and team work. Hence the conflict between Face and Subtle over who is the most important to their business. This quarrel reveals that their constructed and multiple identities rely on each other, but also presents the personal identities of the three conmen. Thus, Face met Subtle in the liberties at 'Pie-corner [while he] went pinned up in the several rags'.<sup>[19]</sup>It is thank to Face, who 'advanced all [his] black arts; lent [him], beside, a house to practice in' if Subtle can practice his conning activities and adopt his new identity as the Doctor Subtle.<sup>[20]</sup>Similarly, Face, the former 'Honest' housekeeper, could not have become Captain Face, or Lungs without Subtle's help, who 'Raised [him] from brooms and dust and wat'ring pots'.<sup>[21]</sup>Dol Common is also of a prior importance to the conning business since she mediates between Subtle and Face conflict as she urges them to 'work close and friendly'.<sup>[22]</sup> They need the gulls to create such identities, and they need each other's help to sustain those identities. Hence Subtle orders to Dol to throw herself 'in a down-bed, as dark as any dungeon'.<sup>[23]</sup>She must 'Firk, like a flounder, kiss, like a scallop'. Subtle and Face's injunctions as managers in a regular business permits their constructed identities work efficiently toward a common goal 'on with your tire. / And, Doctor, with your robes'.<sup>[24]</sup>' You must go tune your virginal, no losing O' the least time, and (do you hear?) good action!' urges Face to Dol.<sup>[25]</sup>Similarly, Face manage to rescue Subtle's endangered

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identity since Surly discovered the true nature of their actions ‘ Don Bawd and Pick-purse? [Knocking him down]’.[26]Thus, Subtle created identity as the doctor is saved thank to team work. Throughout the play, each character’s identity is efficiently sustained thank to others’ help in order to succeed in their conning business ‘ help me off, first, with my gown’,[27]‘ Dol, get his suit’.[28]Character’s identity in Marriage-à-la mode do rely on other characters as well. Indeed, Leonidas and Palmyra’s identities are created thank to Hermogenes’ help. First, Leonidas, the rightful heir, is designated by Hermogenes as Polymada’s son while Palmyra is in fact Polymada’s only offspring ‘ Sir, he is yours’ (I. i. 373). This paradox is hinted through Leonidas’ remark ‘ Either I am, or will deserve to be your son’ (I. i. 412). Indeed, if Leonidas true identity is not the one of Polymada’s son, it is nonetheless the one of the rightful and unique heir. This complex identity could not exist without Hermogenes help. Thus, characters in The Alchemist and Marriage-a-la-modecannot totally create their own identity without each other’s help. To the extent that we need help from other persons to create one’s identity, it becomes plain that no one can actually fully control his own identity alone. Indeed, we are the product of one’s social environment which influence us. Hence characters’ attempts to follow fashion in order to create their identity. Melantha strives to create her identity as a respectable lady from the court. She relies on Philotis, who provides her in French words ‘ you know you are paid so well for furnishing me with new words for my daily conversation?’ (III. i. 189). As Rodophil remarks ‘ No lady can be so curious of a new fashion, as she is of a new french word’ (I. i. 196). She follows a fashion that is significant for the 17thcentury corroborating with the french title of the play, Marriage-à-la-mode. Indeed, Louis XIV’s court at the end of <https://assignbuster.com/can-identity-be-self-created-characterization-in-the-alchemist-and-marriage-a-la-mode/>



the XVIIIth century had a strong political and cultural influence in Europe. Rodophil highlights that fashion: ' I find my mistress is one of those that run mad in new French words' (II. i. 48). Thus, Melantha is subject to her social context's influences, over which she has no control as her frenetic use of French words attests. Thus, characters have ultimately no control over who they are and how they appear to the world. Indeed, Palmyra's royal blood betrays her disguise during the masquerade. ' She cannot hide so much divinity. Disguised, and silent, yest some graceful motion breaks from her and shines round her like a glory' (IV. ii. 12). Even while attempting to hide her true identity, Palmyra finds herself betrayed by her nobility. Hence her remark attesting of the uncontrollable nature of identity. ' I am content to be what heaven has made me' (I. i. 436). In the same way, Argaleon notices that ' a virgin of so excellent beauty' could not have peasant parents (I. i. 344). If identity in comic characters can be controlled, it cannot in tragic or royal ones. Thus, Palamede is fooled by Doralice disguise, while Leonidas recognizes his royal lover instantly. One's identity is determined by birth, and social context. It is therefore not controllable by anyone. Hence Hermogenes' remark ' I was born with humble thoughts and lowly, like my birth' to justify his scheme that deceived Polymadas (III. i. 391). Polymadas also recognizes in Leonidas his royal blood ' He has I know not what / Of greatness in his looks, and of high fate' (IV. iv. 9). In the Alchemist, Mammon comically claims to recognize in Dol, a prostitute, her identity as a noble scholar. Once again, her face familiar to him would betray her high birth ' There is a strange nobility i'your eye / [...] Methinks you do resemble One o'the Austriac princes'.[29] Thus, identity cannot be self-created since it is ultimately not controllable by anyone, but is rather determined by birth or <https://assignbuster.com/can-identity-be-self-created-characterization-in-the-alchemist-and-marriage-a-la-mode/>

social context's influences. Furthermore, one's identity cannot be totally self-created since it relies on other's judgement. If one is able to self-create his identity by influencing other's opinion through disguises or language use, it is nonetheless partially determined by how we are seen by others.

Melantha's attempt to control her identity through the use of French words is ridiculed by other characters. Indeed, Rodophil describes her as 'a town lady, without any relation to the court' (I. i. 190). As other ladies, she 'ran mad' in her ambitions to be a respected courtier. Though 'nothing can be so ridicule as a mere town-lady' she exposes herself to the 'railleries' of other characters since it is ridiculous 'especially at court' (III. v. 108-11). She is eventually called 'an impertinent lady' by Artemis and Palmyra (V. i. 94).

Although she strives to manage her reputation, she cannot uphold the identity of a court-lady she wishes to have since she eventually have no control over people's opinion. In the same way, Polymadas' social identity cannot be controlled though he is the king. His reputation as the usurper follows him as gossips at court between Artemis and Amalthea attests 'then false Polymadas betrayed [Theagenes] trust?' (I. i. 265). He therefore have no control over his identity, since his reputation in the eyes of his courtier's cannot be sustained. In the Alchemist, though characters prove themselves to control their diverse identities, their true and original identity is eventually revealed. Mammon rejoins other characters in insulting the discovered conmens 'What rogues, bawds, slaves [...] Punk, cockatrice'. [30] Subtle, formerly called 'your worship' or 'master', becomes 'The bawdy doctor'.

[31] His social identities are eventually dismissed by the discovery of his actions. His personal original identity is the one of a low-class swindler living in the liberties. [32] Face 'the cozening captain' recovers his identity as the '<https://assignbuster.com/can-identity-be-self-created-characterization-in-the-chemist-and-marriage-a-la-mode/>

honest' Jeremy Butler. Dol Common, the Queen of Faery, eventually turns out to be 'Madam suppository' and flees with Subtle.[33] Thus, one cannot totally control his identity since it ultimately depends on other people's opinion. If identity can be self-created to the extent that one has control over many aspects that define who we are, including appearances, language and our actions, it remains ultimately uncontrollable.

Indeed, one finds himself unable to control the opinions people have from himself. Individuals have agency or free will in deciding what to think of someone else. If their judgment can be influenced, it cannot be controlled. Moreover, we need each other to create one's identity. First, we rely on other people to help us create who we want to be through imitation or team work. Second, we need interactions with other people to influence their opinions since our social identity rests on their judgment. If heroic characters like Leonidas have no or few control over who they are since they are determined by fate and birth, comic characters like Face seem to control perfectly their diverse and constructed identities. Thus, the disguises they use are efficient, while Palmyra's disguise cannot veil her high birth. Identity is therefore a complex concept, which can be partially controlled and created by ourselves.

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