

The importance of money in the alchemist.



Money is one of the key themes in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, with all of the characters appearing to be influenced by the promise of wealth in some way. The conmen, Face and Subtle, hold money as being greatly important, as they trick all of the other men into giving them money. The men who are tricked are paying Face and Subtle for the promise of more wealth via the Philosopher's Stone. The most important characters in exploring the theme of the importance of money in the play are Sir Epicure Mammon, Subtle and Face. The greed of Subtle and Face acts as the driving force of the play, as they continue to delve deeper and deeper into a world of misdirection and lies to steal money from the willing victims. Sir Epicure Mammon is an elderly man deluded by illusions of grandeur and ideas of spectacular riches which he talks about incessantly. We also see money being vitally important to other characters, such as Dapper, who is willing to make a fool of himself for the, 'Queen of fairy,' so that he may possess a spirit which will allow him to cheat in gambling. This shows how he places the obtaining of money above his morals and dignity, as he embarrasses himself and is so willing to trick others, whilst ironically being tricked himself.

The importance of money to both Face and Subtle is apparent throughout the play, with the trouble they both go to being an accurate representation of the importance of money to them. They could easily con any of the men which they trick throughout the play, however they try and trick all of them, often at the same time, to make more and more money. There are constant situations which require Face and Subtle to think on his feet and improvise to keep the con going, such as when Dapper must be ushered, blindfolded and on his knees, into the toilet to avoid detection from Mammon. When they

think where they should hide Dapper, Dol says very crudely, ' In the privy,' which is followed by Subtle quickly dressing it up to sound more glamorous, ' Come along, sir, I must shew you Fortune's privy lodgings.' This shows who Subtle is able to continue the charade to get more money out of Dapper, whilst the reason for hiding him, that Mammon is entering and is giving him more money, shows the extent of his and Face's greed. The prioritization of money over morality and a disregard for other people can be seen in Subtle and Face's two line exchange after the talk of the, ' privy,' as Face asks Subtle, ' Are they perfumed, and his bath ready?' to which Subtle wittily replies, ' All: Only the fumigation's somewhat strong.' This comedic line shows more than just the wit and quick-thinking of Subtle and Face, but the manipulative qualities which they possess and the total disregard for dignity they show all of the men whilst stealing from them.

The character of Sir Epicure Mammon shows the extent to which money can be important to the characters, as this is the key characteristic of Mammon. There are various examples throughout the play where he shows that the importance of money to him takes priority over other needs and influences his judgments. When Mammon is presented with Dol, whom he is told is a gracious woman of nobility, he compares her with noble figures known to be unattractive, ' methinks you do resemble one of the Austriac princes.' He continues this when he says, ' The house of Valois just had such a nose, and such a forehead yet the Medici of Florence boast.' The fact that Mammon compares her to these people is important in showing the importance of money and social status to him, as they are physically unattractive people but hold a high social standing and possess wealth, showing how the

importance of money has corrupted his taste and opinion of what is attractive.

Another point on these comparisons is that all of the nobility which he mentions are foreign, 'Austriac... Valois... Florence...' as foreign things were contextually seen as more extravagant and expensive, as this was a time where international trade between European powers was developing and still fragile. There are many examples of Mammon demonstrating how money is one of his main priorities, as he talks frequently about his plans for the near future, all of which involve him having exorbitant amounts of money, especially gold. The fact that he is so enveloped in the idea of possessing, very specifically, gold, is a potential indication that money does not hold as high a place in his list of priorities as social status and ego. When Face tells him that his, 'stuff will be all changed shortly,' Mammon asks whether this will be, 'into gold,' to which Face replies, 'To gold and silver, sir.' Mammon then says very pompously, 'Silver I care not for,' which appears very elitist and conscious of the possession of gold being concordant with a higher social position. This idea of social status is supported by Face's following line which reads, 'Yes, sir, a little to give beggars,' which supports Mammon's exaggerated concept of the materials one possesses being synonymous with their social status. The possession of money can therefore, in this instance, be seen as more of a means to an end for Mammon, as the possession of money is very important, but only so that he can be seen as more noble, making his social position more important.

Money is crucial to Jonson's play, as the pursuit of wealth by both the conmen and the people being tricked drive the plot forward. For certain

characters such as Sir Epicure Mammon, the possession of money can be seen as a means to an end as they strive for something which can only be achieved through the possession of money. Regardless of the reason for owning wealth, money is without doubt, the most vital of commodities in The Alchemist.