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## The Face of Comic Revenge in Jonson's *Alchemist*

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When one thinks of early modern dramatic examples of revenge, the first titles that spring to mind may include *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, and *The Spanish Tragedy*. These three and others adhere to a rough template: first, the play begins with social or political unrest; second, the conflict comes to a head through the action of the play; and third, the conflict is resolved by the final act, often with few survivors. You may even be familiar with the phrase: "In the Fourth Act the die is cast. In the Fifth Act the cast dies." These qualities can be anticipated in tragedies, but can also be found as tragic elements encompassed within other genres. Revenge can be found in comedies alongside other stereotypes and expectations: the restoration of social order and a marriage or at least the implication or anticipation of a marriage (Hopkins 16). Dramatic expectations and stereotypes were formed through years of perfecting and use by Renaissance dramatists; however, as soon as they were established, playwrights began to break with dramatic expectations and blur the lines between tragedy and comedy. Shakespeare created plays like *The Tempest* in which both tragic and comic circumstances fuel the plot and the conclusion includes both a death, as Prospero abandons his magic, and an impending marriage between Ferdinand and Miranda. Ben Jonson, too, contributed to this new genre and engaged tragic themes within comedy.

In *The Alchemist* (1610), Jonson combines a London city-comedy with tragic political unrest fuelled by revenge. The political unrest doubles as a comic element as it is a satiric dissent between three knaves running an alchemical scheme from within a Blackfriars residence. The opening proceeds from an explosive first scene of infighting between the knaves, an unrest that, once it is initially quelled, lies dormant and is subtly carried through each scene and ultimately results in the undoing of the entire scheme. The two primary contenders are Face and Subtle, and they argue over "who made whom, and implicitly over who is more powerful, creative and knowledgeable" (Van Dyke 256). The conclusion of the play includes divergent thematic elements: a wedding, which is consistent with a comedic motif; betrayal and exile, consistent with a tragic motif; and several elements between the two. The most perplexing conclusive element, however, is the role of Face. As one of the knaves, he should have been on the receiving end of either punishment or redemption, and yet he is subjected to neither. Instead, he is the medium through which punishment is doled out to his fellow knaves. Throughout the play, Face seethes at the implication that he is inferior to Subtle; as reprisal, Face orchestrates an elaborate scheme for revenge. The plot against Subtle is threefold: Face strips Subtle of the shared goods; he insults Subtle's ability as an alchemist; and Face proves, in answer to the initial question, which is the greater knave. Through careful investigation of the text, as the play evolves, alliances shift, and furies grow, evidence suggests that Face has this betrayal in mind throughout the entirety of the play. First, the insult is delivered in the context of an argument between Face and Subtle. Second, the offence chafes as the plot progresses, and though unsteady truces are

established and dismantled, the fact remains that each knave is seeking his own end, whether a wealthy widow, goods, or, in Face's case, revenge. Finally, Face exalts over Subtle and Dol, using petty insults to crown his victory. Face's dialogue and actions leave no question that his motivation is revenge.

The first obstacle to overcome in understanding the rift between Face and Subtle, and the former's motivation for revenge, is to undo the assumption that the knaves are a united front in the plot of the play. The battle lines in *The Alchemist* between the knaves and the gulls are immediately and clearly drawn. With the exception of the late arrival of Lovewit, only two groups of characters exist, one group to gull and the other to be gulled. There is an unfortunate effect of this division, as Joyce Van Dyke explains: "a homogenization of the knavish characters takes place, and frequently that homogenization leaves us with Subtle as representative knave, or as the embodiment of the trio's abilities" (253). With such clear distinctions between knaves and gulls, criticism has often represented the knaves as a unified group. Subtle may appear as the leader because his role as the alchemist requires him to speak with more authority and remain in the same alchemical attire, while Face and Dol transform between different costumes. What this phenomenon ignores is the division between the knaves themselves, a division that is shockingly evident in the first scene, and persists by way of various veiled remarks and hidden monologues throughout the rest of the play. The division itself is best understood by examining the specific argument from which it proceeds.

Though Face and Subtle both perform equally important yet dissimilar tasks in aid of the alchemical scheme, each values their own contribution above the other's. Face, in accordance with the implications of his name, is the representative or 'face' of the alchemical business to the outside world. Face frequents public houses to search for new gulls, assesses their individual desires, and, finally, presents the alchemist as the purveyor of said desires. At this point, Subtle takes over the gulling. Once prompted by Face as to what is expected by each client, Subtle accentuates different faculties of alchemy, from simple divination and fortune telling to the creation of the fabled philosopher's stone. "They allow, in succession, Dapper, Drugger, Mammon, Kastril and Tribulation to sell themselves their own dreams and this is no mean talent" (Arnold 154). It is no mean talent, because it must be executed subtly. Each character has his own important role in the alchemical scheme: the first to discern and the second to provide the dreams of the clients. Though the tasks are incomparable, Face and Subtle dispute who is the more valued of the two. The insults they exchange in the first scene unhinge the tentative agreement and harmony, which had previously been referred to as a "venture tripartite" (I.i.135). Of all the accusations, Face takes the greatest offence at the insinuation that Subtle trained him, and he argues, "Why, I pray you, have I been countenanced by you? Or you, by me?" (I.i.21-2). They then engage in a lengthy debate, disparaging each other and trying to claim supremacy. Their reconciliation at the end of the scene is a timid one, as they say they will "prove today who shall shark best" (I.i.159). In fact, it isn't reconciliation at all, since they are still at odds to prove who can fleece the most money from the neighbourhood gulls. In the rare moments between clients, the rivalry is often a topic of discussion:

Why, now, you smoky persecutor of nature!            Now do you  
 see that something's to be done,    Beside your beech-coal, and  
 your cor'sive waters, Your crosslets, crucibles, and curcubites?  
 You must have stuff brought home to you to work on? And, yet,  
 you think, I am at no expense            In searching out these  
 veins, then following 'em,            Then trying 'em out. 'Fore God,  
 my intelligence    Costs me more money than my share oft  
 comes to,    In these rare works. (I.iv.100-9)

Face claims that his work is of an intellectual nature, rather than Subtle's alchemical ramblings in the presence of bubbling flasks and smoking beakers. The tentative equilibrium brought on by Dol's intervention is completely rejected, and Face continues to smart from the insult of Subtle's implied superiority.

Though Subtle and Face enjoy a short-lived truce, once alliances shift again, their rivalry reignites and rages through the rest of the play. When the wealthy widow Dame Pliant appears, both men quickly discern her two most obvious qualities: marriageability and fortune. They agree to settle the obvious dispute: "We'll e'en draw lots, and he that fails shall have/ The more in goods, the other has in tail" (II.vi.86-7). The two recognize the need for cooperation in order to deceive Pliant, and they form a compromise for the potential gains, one being compensated with cash while the other gets the widow. Further, they make a point to mention that Dol should be left out of the profit from this particular venture (II.vi.92). This later proves to be a point of dispute when Subtle attempts to cheat Face out of both the widow and the money. Face threatens him: "Stand to your word,/ Or – here comes Dol. She knows" (IV.vii.104-5). Their cooperation is only tentative and held together simply by potential betrayal, which eventually comes to fruition. Once the alchemical scheme is undone, Subtle and Dol are tasked with packing up their ill-gotten goods. Subtle betrays the secret of the wealthy widow and the two plan to abandon Face once they have left with the goods. Even though Subtle was co-conspirator with Face concerning Dame Pliant, he claims their planned betrayal is justified: "Thou'st cause, when the slave will run a-wiving, Dol,/Against the instrument, that was drawn between us" (V.iv.79-80). Though Subtle himself had gone 'against the instrument' when he and Face had drawn lots for the widow, he exchanged one deceit for the next with the aim of financial gain.

Both Subtle and Face display the ability to scheme both with and against the other in order to maintain the scheme's profitability; and the continually changing alliances within the tripartite are important even though they are weak, because they display the selfish nature within each knave. In Face's revenge plot, he understands the need to work effectively to maintain a successful alchemical scheme, and quell his anger until later. After yet another influx of ill-gotten money, as Face is soliloquizing and calculating his take for the day, Dol interrupts him to enquire after the health of triumvirate. Face explains they are contented with their take:

As with the few, that had entrenched themselves Safe, by their  
discipline, against a world, Dol: And laughed within those  
trenches, and grew fat With thinking on the booties, Dol,  
brought in Daily, by their small parties. (III.iii.34-8)

Face describes a group at ease, impervious to attack because of their discipline and perpetually growing in wealth. This description can hardly describe the relationships between Subtle, Face and Dol, except when the alchemical scheme is in operation. The only apt part of the analogy is it anticipates infighting once the daily influx of wealth is stunted, and their impenetrable walls of guile are brought down. All of this takes place at the return of Face's master, Lovewit; the invading force for which there is no defence.

Face's actions in the final act of the play appear to be a wild, uncalculated attempt to save himself from punishment, but, when examined carefully, a stratagem for revenge appears. When his master Lovewit unexpectedly arrives and disrupts the alchemical scheme, the question remains whether Face was actually surprised or whether he had anticipated his master's arrival. Earlier in the play, Face reassured Subtle and Dol against Lovewit's untimely arrival:

Oh, fear not him. While there dies one a week O'the plague,  
he's safe, from thinking toward London. Beside, he's busy at his  
hopyards, now: I had a letter from him. If he do,  
He'll send such word, for airing o'the house As you shall  
have sufficient time, to quit it. (I.i.182-187)

These assurances appear to be well-reasoned and indicative of a well-established routine; however, in this instance, Lovewit does not adhere to expectations and arrives unannounced. Face's first concern, after an apology, is to secure his immunity from any reprimand from his master as punishment for the alchemical scheme:

Give me but leave to make the best of my fortune, And only  
pardon me th'abuse of your house: It's all I beg. I'll help  
you to a widow, In recompense, that you shall  
gi'me thanks for. (V.iii.82-85)

Once Lovewit accepts the recompense, Face sets about scheming to strip the knaves of their goods. He warns Subtle and Dol that Lovewit has arrived and instructs them to gather up the goods and prepare themselves to flee. After they have completed this task, Face triumphs over them, explaining:

The right is, my master Knows all,  
has pardoned me, and he will keep 'em. Doctor, 'tis true (you  
look) for all your figures: I sent for him, indeed. (V.iv.126-  
129)

He glories over Subtle and Dol, explaining Lovewit's return and claims all the goods for his master. Face adds further insult with the remark that the self-professed fortune-teller could not predict this occurrence. He also claims to have called his master to London, though we know from Face's conversation with Lovewit, in which he begs forgiveness, that he too was surprised by his master's arrival. Face's motivation to lie and claim he had summoned his master is purely to add further humiliation to his revenge. Commandeering the communal goods was one simple form of revenge, however, Face added the personal elements of insult for his own benefit, and to show how he has excelled Subtle in knavery.

The question that raged between the two chief knaves since the opening lines of the play has reached its head, and Face has emerged as the better, more cunning knave. The reader sees a conclusion to the fiery argument between Face and Subtle from Act I in which each claimed responsibility for the other's talents and abilities. Even though, Face has emerged as ultimately more conniving, the question of who taught whom is still unexplained: as Van Dyke explains, "the play offers us no evidence that Face requires or receives coaching in acting from Subtle" (254). There are two possibilities concerning the lack of evidence in this argument. First, if Face indeed did not receive any training from Subtle, he would simply be indignant at the suggestion. Second, if Subtle is correct in trying to claim responsibility for teaching Face, the fact that no teaching or transfer of knowledge takes place in *The Alchemist* is simply because the teaching had ceased by the opening of the play, as the alchemical scheme had already been perfected. Either eventuality would lead Face to seek revenge for Subtle's claim to supremacy. In the first case, it would be that Face retained the bitterness of Subtle's claim, so he set about a scheme to strip Subtle of everything to prove that he was always the better strategist. In the second case, Subtle could have so effectively trained his apprentice Face, that the student trumped the master in a final coup d'état. The conflict that has raged throughout the play between Subtle and Face is only concluded insofar as it has reached its end; in truth, the audience is never satisfied as to which is the master and which the student. The only definite interpretation is that Face successfully deceives Subtle. While his success may indicate that Face is superior, it could also be an instance of the student outmanoeuvring the master. In the latter case, Face would owe his roguish expertise to Subtle, but had learned enough to excel beyond his tutelage.

To add to the insult of defeat, Face takes the time to lord his triumph over Subtle and Dol, and in their last exchange, makes a singularly cutting remark to each that confirms his intentions as those of revenge. Judd Arnold explains that one level of punishment doled out to the knaves is that, "like their dupes, they remain exactly what they were, their hoped-for transmutations unfulfilled" (162). In this argument, the alchemical scheme was not simply a means by which to acquire copious amounts of money, but a way for the knaves to undergo a social transformation. Subtle, whether through repeatedly acting the same part, or simply a form of self-delusion, began to believe himself capable of alchemical feats. In the first explosive fight with Face, he bellows, "I will teach you/ How to beware to tempt a fury again/ That carries tempest in his hand and voice" (I.i.60-2). Subtle threatens Face with powers he has made up, powers he has duped others into believing he possesses. As they argue about who taught whom, Subtle adopts alchemical jargon to describe how he elevated Face "to a degree of

excellence that he had never known before, [and] brought him to the very edge of perfection” (Flachmann 264). Subtle, intentionally or not, was attempting to transform himself into a true alchemist. On the other hand, Dol’s transformation would have been less impossible than Subtle’s, but still quite implausible. In the alchemical scheme, she often dressed in a fine velvet gown and impersonated a woman of status, and with the right amount of money for a dowry, she could have ensured an advantageous marriage. Face, however was never taken in by this dream of transformation, as he was constantly aware that the alchemical scheme could only survive as long as Lovewit was absent. Seeing weakness in Subtle and Dol, in their final exchange, Face takes advantage of the opportunity to launch one last barb at each of his fellow knaves. To Dol he offers a sheet in which to preserve her velvet gown, the gown in which she presented herself as a noble woman. To Subtle he offers to send a client his way once he has set up his new alchemical deceit, triumphing in the fact that the alchemist will have to resume his deceit elsewhere. While Face himself had transformed from the butler into a captain and an alchemical assistant during the scheme, he was constantly aware of the predetermined end of their deceit at the return of his master. With this knowledge, Face was not deceived by his transformation, and is instead able to ridicule both Dol and Subtle, adding derision to his already vengeful actions towards them.

Jonson’s conclusion to *The Alchemist* is formed out of perversions of both tragic and comic resolutions. The alchemical scheme is covered up by further deception perpetrated by Face and his master, as they make jests at the expense of the gulls. The ill-gotten gains are stripped from the thieves, as is fitting a tragic resolution, but the resolution is incomplete, as the goods are not returned to the rightful owners. Finally, the marriage, the tell-tale sign of a comedy, is performed with the groom in disguise and without the knowledge of the widow’s brother and legal guardian. At the centre of the chaos, Face proves to be the driving force, and, in turn, his driving force is revenge. He is able to revenge himself on Subtle and Dol and yet escape punishment himself. Wendy Griswold argues this is an established expectation of city comedy: “The rascals of city comedy often go unpunished, even become objects of their victims’ admiration” (20). Face is no exception to this rule, although he does help his own cause by pleading with Lovewit, “Sir, you were wont to affect mirth, and wit” (V.iii.80). Face is only saved from his master’s wrath because his master, true to the implications of his name, celebrates genius and is always in want of a laugh. The widow and ill-gotten goods were also a factor in Face’s clemency, as Lovewit explains:

That master That had  
 received such happiness by a servant, In such a widow,  
 and with so much wealth, Were very ungrateful if he  
 would not be A little indulgent to that servant’s wit.  
 (V.v.146-150)

By disassembling the established method of comic conclusion, Jonson allows Face revenge against Subtle and Dol, restoration to his role as Jeremy the butler, and reprieve from punishment at the hands of his master.

Face's greatest weapon throughout *The Alchemist* was the knowledge that their scheme was only ever temporary as it relied on Lovewit being absent for fear of the plague. Face always had the knowledge of his own place as butler; perhaps he could even anticipated clemency from his lenient master. He also had the guarantee that Dol and Subtle would have to retreat once the scheme collapsed: they would have to retreat from whence they came, outside the city walls (Ouelette 377). Once the plague subsided in town, Lovewit and others who had retreated from London would return, which necessitated that, "once the disease is gone, the knaves, too, vanish" (Ross 440). In contrast to Subtle and Dol's self-delusional fantasies of transformation, Face utilises his knowledge, experience and cunning, all with the prompting and driving force of revenge. Face's revenge against Subtle is threefold: he strips Subtle of the shared goods, insults his ability as an alchemist, and proves, in answer to the initial question, which is the greater knave. However, Jonson is able to couch Face's revenge within the comic conclusion to *The Alchemist* in such a way that the audience does not despair for Subtle and Dol (as they had themselves been plotting against Face), and the audience is instructed to follow Lovewit's example and find amusement in Face's actions, rather than reprimand him. While Alan Fisher uses Face's story to elucidate the point that "participatory irony has as many pitfalls as pleasures" (72), in this instance, Face has found a way to perpetrate his revenge by ensuring Subtle and Dol encounter the pitfalls, while he enjoys the pleasures.

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