

## **BEN JONSON'S *THE ALCHEMIST*** **A friend of the First Folio family**

*The Alchemist* (1610) is yet another Jonsonian play to secrete the general philosophical theme of the Shakespearean plays as allegory; and in the argument to come we will be on very familiar ground indeed.

Where are the keys to its mystery to be found? Firstly, the central character Lovewit suggests by his name the love of wit: 'I love a teeming wit as I love my nourishment': V, i, 28. We remember the central role that wit plays in the First Folio, for example in the character of Feste in *TN*, as well as its many other clowns and fools. This is the wit derived from knowledge of the unseen world, the Faustian dimension which lies unseen below the surface of things, object of study of the great modern artists, scientists, and depth psychologists – and Bacon was godfather to them all. Further, FF makes clear that this is the unseen world as described in the Gnostic written word, and that the wit derived therefrom is inseparable from wisdom, which is the Holy Grail of the hero's (finally Shakespeare's) questing.

So far so good. The suspicion now is that the written word may be represented in *TA*; and our attention fixes upon Doll Common. We remember that Doll Tearsheet in FF represents, like Mistress Nell Quickly and, remarkably, Ophelia, the Love Goddess as recreated in the imagination of the auto-erotist. The Queen of Hell, Who is also the Grail Queen, guardian of the unseen world, is always immanent in the Goddess of Love; and Doll, Nell, and Ophelia, are also Grail Queens, - as most memorably shown in *Hamlet*, - the final reference being to the graphically described seduction of Lucius by Fotis in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, which, as succumbed to by Shakespeare as Puritan in 1587, had precipitated the breakdown. It was Bacon's goal to have his patient Shakespeare engage the Love Goddess Fotis as idea rather than will, and thereby to absorb the wisdom of Apuleius' magical masterpiece of psychic transformation. The suppression of the visual imagination, so as to remove the risk of any Fotis figure – and, by extension, the broader underworld - being created therein, is of course the defining characteristic of Puritanism.

We therefore suspect that Doll Common may be an Ophelia-analogue. This is supported by the character of Subtle, whose name derives from the Latin *subtilis*, the primary meaning of which is 'thin', 'fine', 'slender'. Thinness in FF always signifies, - on the Hermetic principle of 'As without, so within' - the visual imagination, as exemplified for example by the 'lean and hungry' Cassius in *JC* whose body mirrors the hard-edged forms of the visual imagination, in contrast to that of Falstaff, who represents the blind libido. Michael Cassio in *Othello* is another fine example: the name 'Michael' being associated with the sun (imagination) in Trithemius' *De septem secundadeis*.

The probability that Lovewit's house may represent the Gnostic written word becomes a certainty when we examine the Book of Jeremiah for the origins of Face's alter ego Jeremy in *TA*. There we find the following (King James Version):

(1. 9) Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. (10) See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant. (18) For, behold, I have made thee this day a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brazen walls against the

whole land... (19) And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee.

Jonson (or Bacon) has taken the foe to refer to the enemies of the Gnostic tradition: most notably the Puritan tyranny, also Roman Catholicism. The occupants of Lovewit's house therefore bear the values of the written word (Face/Jeremy), the imagination stimulated by it (Subtle), and Love Goddess-Grail Queen (Doll Common). *TA* as a whole is an examination of the factors which go toward enriching the Gnostic written word: and by the end of Act V the Lovewit household will be enriched indeed.

The Puritan response to the written word is beautifully figured in the brawl between Face/Jeremy (word) and Subtle (imagination), with Doll looking on, in the opening scene. The Puritan is at war with the visual imagination vis-à-vis the written word (cf. King Claudius in *Hamlet*: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;/Words without thoughts, never to heaven go."), for the threat it poses with its tendency to recreate Nature with Her inevitable underworld aspect: the specific instance in the plays of Shakespeare being the imagining of the Love Goddess Fotis in her seduction of Lucius in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, which almost certainly precipitated the breakdown of 1587, after Shakespeare had been in thrall to Puritanism for some eight years.

The properly Gnostic response to the written word – to engage its descriptions of Nature as idea, rather than will – is now embodied in the character of Dapper, who enters straight upon the calming of the quarrellers:

*Face* [Dapper] is the heir to forty marks a year,  
Consorts with the small poets of the time...  
Is a fine clerk, and has his ciphering perfect,  
Will take his oath o' the Greek Testament,  
If need be, in his pocket; and can court  
His mistress out of Ovid.

Dapper will spend most of the play blindfolded, to recall blind Gloucester in *King Lear*, who is a Teiresias-figure, master of the inward vision. He looks forward to a tryst with the 'Queen of fairy', to recall Titania in *MND*, who is a Queen of the Ring tradition, or Grail Queen. Both *KL* and *MND* are allegories of psychic transformation, - as is Jonson's *TA*, - in which the ego-in-healing will follow the spoor of the unseen world, which is plentifully indicated in *TA* by the numerous "I"'s for "Ay"'s, as in the following:

*Subtle* And those are your two sides?  
*Drugger* I, sir.

Abel the Drugger is a purveyor of tobacco, which we have seen in previous plays of Jonson to signify the advent of a new principle, as based on the novelty of tobacco in contemporary England, as famously imported by Raleigh. Here it represents the unseen world as idea, as basis of the Gnostic world-view (cf. Richmond in *RIII*). Abel was the son of Adam (the first man), who represents always in Shakespeare's FF the principle of truth, as derived from the ritual of the 'Knight of the Sun' degree of the thirty-three degrees of the (Masonic) Ancient and Accepted Rite of Scotland, the principles of which supply much of the philosophical backbone of the plays. (See the brilliant work of Knight and Lomas in retrieving these rituals from oblivion in their *The Second Messiah* (Arrow, 1998)). Cain, his murderer, may be taken to represent the Puritan tyranny; but the Able principle is not to be denied, and is here reborn. Thus, *TA* will end in a (promised) cloud of smoke.

Sir Epicure Mammon will be gulled of his wealth to enrich the Lovewit household. Jonson has taken Epicurus as the type of the Gnostic philosopher. The Greek *mamonas* simply meant 'wealth', with no pejorative overtones. Money bears the value here, as always in S.'s FF, of the power of a principle. On the other hand, Ananias (Pauline Christian world-view) will later repudiate the Greek tradition. Consistently, Sir Epicure woos Doll Common (Grail Queen). They will retire to the upstairs garden. The garden or orchard represents always in S.'s FF the Gnostic written word; while 'upstairs' suggests, here as in FF, idea as opposed to will, or mind to body, or Apollo to Dionysius (cf. Hamlet's stowing of Polonius' body in an attic (activated libido invading consciousness of incipient schizophrenic)).

For the significance of Ananias, we must turn to Acts 9 (King James Version):

(17) And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hand on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. (18) And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptised.

Ananias is yet another to be gulled of his wealth: the power of his principle passing to the Gnostic written word. For Lovewit's house is also the scene of a giving of sight and the Holy Ghost. Ananias' bitter antipathy to Rome signifies that this is not sight in the Roman Catholic sense of scripture, but rather the Gnostic faculty of inner vision, as confirmed by the blindfolding of Dapper.

Kastril and his sister the Widow are a fascinating pair. We recall that the Widow in FF (e.g. in *The Taming of the Shrew*) is always a reference to the Goddess Isis, as venerated in the Masonic tradition, whose brethren style themselves 'Sons of the Widow'. (Apuleius celebrated Her as the greatest of the Great Goddesses of the ancient world.) This is to identify themselves with Her son Horus. Now, Horus was worshipped as a hawk in ancient Egypt; and the hawk in FF (e.g. the hawking scene in *2HVI* II, i) is likewise always a reference to the Gnostic ideal. Which brings us to Kastril, whose name is derived from the word 'castril', a small hawk, which was current in contemporary England (the OED quotes Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1620)). Jonson can thus unequivocally be linked with Sir Francis Bacon as a prominent Freemason of his day. (Note once again that this is not the debased variety of our times, but the authentic Freemasonry, which preserved the original teachings of Jesus, the line being Egypt→David→Jerusalem Church→Rex Deus line→Knights Templar→Freemasonry (Knight and Lomas, *The Second Messiah*)).

We have seen in *1-3HVI (UDGCB)* that the "I" principle is closely linked to Winchester/Beaufort, who represents the Roman Catholic Church: the lesson being that Rome, in shunning intellectual engagement with the unseen world, remains at its mercy. We have also noted that "I go" in FF often refers to the Gnostic process of breaking this crippling yoke to the underworld. In terms of the subject's own inner life, this is expressed in the ritual of the 'Knight of the Sun' (twenty-eighth) degree of the Ancient and Accepted Rite of Scotland: '*Ye who have not the power to subdue passion, flee from this place of truth*'. In this light, the following assumes the deepest significance:

*Drugger* Yes, faith, she dwells in sea-coal lane, - did cure me,  
With sodden ale, and pellitory of the wall;  
Cost me but two pence. I had another sickness  
Was worse than that.

*Face* I, that was with the grief...

[...]

*Kastril* I go.

Face's "I" for "Ay" serves to identify Abel's sickness with the unseen world; his healing, the breaking of the shackles of this world through the ministry of the Gnostic world-view. This is reinforced by Kastril's 'I go' a few lines later.

Face's determination to marry the Widow reflects the nature of the Gnostic written word as descriptive of the unseen world, and a means to attaining the Holy Grail of wisdom based on knowledge of this world. Surly's Spanish disguise, and the later adoption of this dress by Lovewit, recalls the value of Spain in FF as the unseen world. Letters, papers and writs bear always in FF the value of the written word; and so here (IV ii, 17):

*Enter Subtle, with a paper*  
*Subtle* My most honour'd lady [*Widow*]...  
          ...you are to undergo  
          An honourable fortune, very shortly...

The Gnostic world-view is based on knowledge of the unseen world:

*Subtle* Nay, and by this means, sir, you shall be brother  
          To a great count.  
*Kastril* I, I knew that at first.

- While the art in question concerns it:

*Face* And yet this rogue would come in disguise,  
          By the temptation of another spirit,  
          To trouble our art, though he could not hurt it!  
*Kastril* I, I know...

The Gnostic written word is where the underworld asserts itself as idea (V, i):

*Lovewit* Has there been such resort, say you?  
*3 Neighbour* I, some as brave as lords.

Finally, Dapper makes his suit to Doll in the guise of the Queen of Fairies, - to recall Titania in *MND*, a Ring/Grail Queen,- and is gulled of his money. The imagination, and the forms created therein, have done their job:

*Subtle* Soon at night, my dolly...  
          [We will] take our leaves of this o'er weening rascal,  
          This peremptory Face.

- While the written word remains honoured by the new-transformed ego (Lovewit retaining Face/Jeremy). Momentously, the ring, chain, and pearl motifs from FF now are manifest:

*Subtle* Yes, tell her,  
          She must by any means address some present  
          To the cunning man [*Face*]...  
                                  ...send a ring  
          Or chain of pearl.

These, then, is the gift of the underworld to the written word: the Holy Grail itself (the Ring and Grail traditions being the same), that is, the wisdom based on knowledge of the unseen world as described in the written word. The chain is symbolic here, like the golden chain in *The Comedy of Errors*, and Ophelia's garlands in *Hamlet*, of the vulva of the Goddess through which the ego is reborn; while the pearl, recalling especially Clarence's dream in *RIII* I, iv ("Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl..."), symbolises the riches of the unseen world.

[return to top](#)

[home](#)

[index](#)

[contact me](#)

[order](#)

[links](#)