

THE ALCHEMIST BY BEN JONSON



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Review

'Ben Johnson's timeless satire.' Andrzej Lukowski, Time Out London, 02/09/10

About the Author

Ben Jonson contributed to Every Man Out of His Humour; Bartholomew Fair; The Staple of News; Volpone; and Sejanus, His Fall; all from Manchester University Press.

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The Alchemist is a comedy by English playwright Ben Jonson. First performed in 1610 by the King's Men, it is generally considered Jonson's best and most characteristic comedy; Samuel Taylor Coleridge claimed that it had one of the three most perfect plots in literature. The play's clever fulfilment of the classical unities and vivid depiction of human folly have made it one of the few Renaissance plays (except the works of Shakespeare) with a continuing life on stage (except for a period of neglect during the Victorian era). An outbreak of plague in London forces a gentleman, Lovewit, to flee temporarily to the country, leaving his house under the sole charge of his butler, Jeremy. Jeremy uses the opportunity given to him to use the house as the headquarters for fraudulent acts. He transforms himself into "Captain Face," and enlists the aid of Subtle, a fellow conman, and Doll Common, a prostitute. The play opens with a violent argument between Subtle and Face concerning the division of the riches which they have, and will continue to gather. Doll breaks the pair apart and reasons with them that they must work as a team if they are to succeed. Their first customer is Dapper, a lawyer's clerk who wishes Subtle to use his supposed necromantic skills to summon a "familiar" or spirit to help in his gambling ambitions. The tripartite suggest that Dapper may win favour with the "Queen of Fairy," but he must subject himself to humiliating rituals in order for her to help him. Their second gull is Drugger, a tobacconist, who is keen to establish a profitable business. After this, a wealthy nobleman, Sir Epicure Mammon, arrives, expressing the desire to gain himself the philosopher's stone, which he believes will bring him huge material and spiritual wealth. He is accompanied by Surly, a sceptic and debunker of the whole idea of alchemy. He is promised the philosopher's stone and promised that it will turn all base metal into gold. Surly however, suspects Subtle of being a thief. Mammon accidentally sees Doll and is told that she is a Lord's sister who is suffering from madness. Subtle contrives to become angry with Ananias, an Anabaptist, and demands that he should return with a more senior member of his sect (Tribulation). Drugger returns and is given false and ludicrous advice about setting up his shop; he also brings news that a rich young widow (Dame Pliant) and her brother (Kastril) have arrived in London. Both Subtle and Face in their greed and ambition seek out to win the widow.

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Most helpful customer reviews

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Jonson's *The Alchemist* - hilarious Renaissance drama!

By A Customer

This is a very very funny play. I highly recommend it. If you think Renaissance drama means "only Shakespeare", you need to try some of his contemporaries, like the Poet Laureate Ben Jonson. =smile= Of the three Jonson comedies I've yet read, this one is great fun! Be warned that some of the "alchemical" language may seem too specialized, unless you know this time period; since it's supposed to be patter to trick the marks, that's not the detraction it seems to be.

The Alchemist has a legion of characters, most of whom are the marks. They deserve what they get--but because this is Jonson, the ones running the confidence games may not end up as you expect. His type of comedy is atypical of his period in that respect. If you aren't familiar with the Renaissance speech, then I recommend the excellent *New Mermaids* text. The extensive footnotes are mostly a glossary, which is extremely helpful! [Yes, it makes some of the period jokes make sense then.]

Since the characters are drawn broadly, you will be surprised at how easily you will understand them, whether they are greedy or lusty or foolish. The smooth way one con fits into working the next ongoing one is priceless!

Much like *Volpone* [also by Jonson], this is a play about greed, about con games, and about how people can allow avarice, lust and money to corrupt them. Call this satire, parody or farce--no matter, the humor is biting and witty and wild. For comparative humor in the same period, this is somewhat comparable to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*.

I love the way the characters work with and against each other. Subtle may dazzle or mystify with his language, and Dol Common may keep them from destroying their three-way partnership, but Face is my favorite of the trio. He is the trickiest of them all. I like how he fares in the ending too, which leads me to believe Face is like a cat. =grin= To me he's likable in the same outrageous way!

14 of 14 people found the following review helpful.

Great Introduction to Ben Jonson's Comedies

By Michael Wischmeyer

I recently read the early 17th century comedy "Volpone", my first introduction to Ben Jonson. I was surprised by how well Jonson's humor had traveled through 400 years of cultural change. I did have difficulty with Jonson's dedication (several pages), the introductory argument, and the prologue as well as a "Pythagorean literary satire" in Act One, Scene One. But thereafter I found the humor to be natural and enjoyable. I even found myself somewhat sympathetic for the unscrupulous Volpone, Mosca, Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino. I immediately hunted around on my dustier bookshelves for other works of Ben Jonson.

"Epicene" was less easy to digest, but was worth the effort. There is a surprising twist in the final scene and I suggest that the reader avoid any literary criticism or introductions to "Epicene" until after your first reading. I had less empathy for the characters in "Epicene" and it was difficult to identify any "good guys". The characters were not terribly disagreeable, but simply dilettantes that had little concern for morality or ethics. The dialogue is more obscure (and more bawdy) than in "Volpone". I found it helpful to first read the footnotes for a scene before actually reading the scene itself.

"The Alchemist" is more like "Volpone". The main characters are unscrupulous con-men; their targets are gullible, greedy individuals. I learned quite a bit about alchemy, at least alchemy as practiced by 17th century con-men. As with "Volpone" and "Epicene", I was unable to predict how Ben Jonson would bring the play to a satisfactory conclusion. I enjoyed "The Alchemist" and I expect that I will read it again. I don't know if it is performed very often, but it would probably be quite entertaining.

"Bartholomew Fair" introduces a large, motley collection of characters that largely converse in lower class colloquialisms that require some effort to master. The comedy was intended in part to be a satire on Puritans and thereby please King James, but it was equally an introduction to the varied individuals that might be encountered at an annual fair. It was not easy to keep track of the many characters and I continually referred

to the cast listing to reorient myself.

There are a number of collections of Ben Jonson's plays. I recommend an inexpensive collection, "The Alchemist and Other Plays", published by Oxford University Press as a World's Classic. The introduction, glossary, and explanatory footnotes by Gordon Campbell are quite good. Begin with either "Volpone" or "The Alchemist" if you are new to Jonson. I hope you are as surprised and pleased as I was.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Serviceable edition

By melinda

This is a review of the edition, not the play, which is wonderfully funny. The recent (summer 2016) RSC production was terrific! This edition is a school text which does not fully gloss the play but only some of the difficult words. Presumably a teacher in the classroom could discuss words and passages and so forth. But it served my purpose, which was to review the play before seeing the RSC performance I mentioned--it was thin enough to fit into my suitcase. I don't believe a fuller Arden edition is available, and who could carry around a full scholarly edition of Jonson's plays?

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