

“THE ALCHEMIST” AS A MORAL COMEDY PORTRAYING NATURAL FOLLIES; AN ANALYSIS OF BEN JONSON’S POETIC JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

The Alchemist is an entertaining and hilarious comedy. According to Ben Jonson, the aim of his comedy was to “sport with human follies, not with crimes.” He tried to expose human follies to laughter with a purpose to rid people of these follies. Although the comedy is intended to entertain the audience, yet there is always a corrective purpose of it which has been properly taken care of by the author Richards, 1988. As the comedy helps the audience “to try to shed their follies and absurdities by making them laugh at those follies and absurdities,” this is also valid for his play “The Alchemist.” The paper, therefore, aims to highlight The Alchemist as a moral comedy which portrays natural follies in a typical Jonson’s poetic diction style.

Keywords: Comedy, Ben Jonson, The Alchemist, Natural follies, Poetic justice

INTRODUCTION

According to Ben Jonson, the aim of his comedy was to “sport with human follies, not with crimes.” He tried to expose human follies to laughter with a purpose to rid people of these follies (Womack, 1986). Although the comedy is intended to entertain the audience, yet there is always a corrective purpose of it which has been properly taken care of by the author (Richards, 1988). As the comedy helps the audience “to try to shed their follies and absurdities by making them laugh at those follies and absurdities,” this is also valid “The Alchemist” (Ahmad, 1992; Barnes, 1987; Craig, 1999; Donaldson, 1997).

The Alchemist is a comedy par excellence, a highly entertaining, hilarious comedy. The episode in which Dapper is made to believe that he is a favorite of the Queen of Fairies and that he is, in fact, her nephew, is very amusing. Dapper is befooled by the conspirator to such an extent that he allows himself to be gagged by them and then stowed away in the closet. The episode in which Surly appears in the disguise of a Spanish Don, pretending that he knows no English, is again very amusing. This situation is marked by irony because the audience knows the truth about Surly, the conspirators do not. Then there is the pretended madness of Dol, which too is one of the most amusing situations. The outwitting of subtle and Dol by Face constitutes another comic situation. The discomfiture of the various ex-clients of Subtle, when Lovewit deals with them most severely and effectively, is also among the highlights of comedy (Barnes, 1987; Craig, 1999; Donaldson, 1997; Jensen, 1985).

The moral aspect of the play: the evil fate of subtle and Dol

The Alchemist provides plenty of fun and laughter but despite that it is full of moral values. The moral purpose of this play becomes evident if the “ultimate fate of the various characters” is examined. In the case of Subtle, Face and Dol, the author has depicted “crimes, not just follies or absurdities as these persons are criminals.” They “deceive and cheat” their clients and “rob” them. Subtle is the chief criminal because he claims to be “an alchemist capable of manufacturing the elixir or the philosopher’s stone” which can make people wealthy and cure them of all kinds of diseases (Raw, 1989). But actually Subtle is a pretender. He is rightly described towards the end by one of his victims as the “alchemical cozeners”. At the very outset, Face refers to Subtle’s alchemy, his algebra, his minerals, his animals; his conjuring, his cozening, and his dozen of trades. Subtle pretends to have set up a laboratory where he claims to

have started the alchemical process to manufacture the philosopher’s stone. He has promised to provide Mammon with the philosopher’s stone on a particular day and, when that day comes, he finds a way of escaping the responsibility and evading the whole issue by accusing Mammon of having wrecked the whole alchemical process by his sinful indulgence in sexual pleasure on the sacred premises. Subtle similarly cheats the Anabaptists who have also been given a promise that they would get the philosopher’s stone which would enhance their power, influence, and prestige. He also assures them that he can manufacture Dutch dollars for them. He takes enough money from them at the outset and then extorts more from them. He forces them to buy what he calls the “orphans’ goods” which are actually the metallic articles sent to him by Mammon for conversion into gold. Dapper and Druggier too are Subtle’s victims, one being assured that he would be “provided with a familiar or an attendant spirit to enable him to make money” through gambling, and the other having been assured of commercial prosperity through the prescriptions offered by the alchemist. Subtle also shows his real villainous nature by hatching a plot with Dol against Face (Barnes, 1987; Craig, 1999; Donaldson, 1997). Ultimately Subtle has to flee from Lovewit’s house, completely outwitted by Face, and, “without the slightest bit of the accumulated booty. Although Subtle’s punishment is not very severe, yet it is not less as he would now be reduced to the same straitened circumstances in which he was when he entered into a partnership with Face. As such the fate of Subtle is a lesson for those people who “try to make money by crooked methods.” Likewise, Dol shares Subtle’s fate. Her role in the play is also “an obnoxious one.” She is a prostitute; she pretends that she is “subject to fits of madness;” she disguises herself as the Queen of Fairies to throw dust into the eyes of Dapper; she agrees to rob Dame pliant of her jewelry; and she joins Subtle in the latter’s plot against Face. Eventually, she also gets “nothing from the accumulated booty.” Only Face among these three villains escapes “scot-free” and therefore in this case, “the requirements of poetic justice have not been met but flouted in a most outrageous manner” and the “moral impact of the play is certainly diminished” (Barnes, 1987; Craig, 1999; Donaldson, 1997).

Poetic justice, violated in the case of face

Face is a villainous, “active partner in the frauds” practiced by Subtle. He, in fact, entangles victims for Subtle to exploit. It is he who brings Dapper to Subtle and recommends his case for the favor which Dapper seeks from Subtle. It is he who recommends the case of Druggier also to the doctor. He has

memorized all the necessary technical terms, and makes plentiful use of them when required to do so to create an impression on the clients. It is he who assures Kastril of Subtle's powers to work miracles. It is he who procures Dol for Mammon, getting enough money from that man for this service. It is who procures Dame Pliant for the Spanish Don (who is no other than Surly in disguise). Then it is he who hoodwinks Drugger, assuring Drugger that he (Drugger) would be married to Dame Pliant when in actual fact he would himself like to marry her (Barnes, 1987; Craig, 1999; Donaldson, 1997). Finally, he betrays his ex-partners who resultantly are driven away from the house "without a little bit of the booty." He emerges "triumphant" at the end. Here, it seems that the requirements of poetic justice have not been met and Jonson "has lost sight of moral purpose." The establishment of Face in the master's favor at the end greatly "weakens the moral effect" of the play (Womack, 1986).

The dupes in the play, morally flawed persons deserving punishment

When various clients of Subtle find themselves that they have become the victims of his fraud, the moral purpose of the comedy in *The Alchemist* becomes evident. The clients are "proved fools and gulls," but, they are not punished for their "folly or lack of intelligence" only rather they are flawed characters morally. They are ruled by the passion of "avarice or greed," so they are destined to be punished for this vice (Ouellette, 2005). They must also be punished for their blind faith in Subtle and their credulity.

Dapper would like to give up his profession as a lawyer's clerk and to make money through gambling. He wants an attendant spirit to facilitate him "win money at horse-races, card-parties, and dice-parties." He is completely taken in by the assurances given to him by Subtle and Face. He is such an idiot that he swallows the bait when he is told that he is "a nephew of the Queen of Fairies." What he ultimately gets is nothing; and nothing is what he really deserves.

Drugger is another idiot who believes that, by following Subtle's directions as to the construction of his shop, he would be able to attract a large number of customers and thus make plenty of money. Furthermore, he relies on Subtle to arrange his marriage with the rich widow, Dame pliant. He not only pays cash to the conspirators but brings a "damask suit" for the doctor, and then is "completely cheated of his hope of marrying the widow."

The Anabaptists, Tribulation and Ananias, want not only money but also power and authority. They would like to become temporal lords and, at the same time, to increase their influence over the community to a vast extent. They are not only avaricious but hypocritical; and they must also be punished. In the end, their fate, too, is unenviable (Barnes, 1987; Craig, 1999; Donaldson, 1997).

Then there is Mammon who not only aspires to become as rich as King Solomon was, but who would also like to maintain a large harem and would like to acquire, through the philosopher's stone, "sufficient strength and vigor to be able to perform sexual intercourse with fifty women in the course of one night." This man's dreams of wealth, power, and sexual pleasure are simply fantastic. But these dreams end in smoke when an explosion is heard from inside the laboratory. In the end, he is as furious as the Anabaptists, because of his discovery and their discovery that the runaway alchemist was a cozenor (Keenan, 2014). These persons suffer "severely for their greed, credulity, and stupidity." Among the dupes are also Kastril and his sister Dame Pliant although they are not avaricious. As a result, they "neither deserve nor receive any punishment."

In short, in all of these cases, Jonson has been "exceptional in meeting the requirements of poetic justice" and it can be asserted that "*The Alchemist* is a moralist-comedy with teeth in it to bite deep into several vices and follies." The play further generates, in the thoughtful audience, "a much more serious interest than mere entertainment may provide" (Ouellette, 2005).

The failure of poetic justice in the case of surly

There are still cases that show the failure of poetic justice. Surly, e.g. is "an honest man and has been through the fraud being practiced by Subtle." He is determined to bring the man to justice. Moreover, he refrains from seducing Dame Pliant despite getting an opportunity and behaves honorably by proposing her for marriage instead of seducing or deceiving her. In the end, however, despite being an honest man, he has to go away empty-handed and feels bitter to find that his loss is due to the "foolish vice of honesty" which he practiced. This deprivation of Surly certainly offends the ideas of morals justice. It is true that even Surly suffers from the taint of greed because his chief object in wanting to marry Dame Pliant is to mend his fortunes. It is also true that Surly, as his very name suggests, is too solemn and resentful a character. But, considering that he is the most honest among all the characters in the play, he should have been given some kind of reward. Therefore, in this particular case, it is evident that "virtue is not always rewarded, just as vice is not always punished" (Barnes, 1987; Craig, 1999; Donaldson, 1997).

Lovewit's lack of integrity; an undeserved reward for him

Lovewit appears towards the end of the play only and remains the best gainer. He displays "a lack of integrity in his personality" as he forgives all dishonesty of his butler and enters into a pact with him because the butler offers him "a young, rich, and beautiful widow in marriage." Lovewit accepts his butler's offer and also drives away all the ex-clients of Subtle. He even goes to the extent of saying: "I will be ruled by thee in anything, Jeremy." Lovewit receives "a rich prize without having earned it." He tries to justify his pardon of his butler by saying that it was necessary for him to show a little indulgence to the butler in view of the butler's wit and in view of the butler's having provided him with "such a widow, and with so much wealth." He admits that he "has departed from an old man's gravity or strict canon;" but he declares that "a young wife and a good brain which his butler has got, justify this departure." However, it is not a convincing logic and it is right to say that "the distribution of rewards and punishments in this play has the randomness of life, not the neatness of poetic justice" (Barnes, 1987; Craig, 1999; Donaldson, 1997).

"Crime and Punishment," not a suitable heading for the play

It has been suggested by one critic that crime and punishment would be a useful heading for this play. But this view is not strictly right. In Jonson's play *Volpone*, the criminals are punished severely (Womack, 1986). But in *The Alchemist*, the punishment of the criminals is not severe (Ouellette, 2005; Aurangzeb, 2019). Subtle and Dol certainly lose their share of the booty, but they escape the law; and, as for Face, he not only retains his position but gains his master's favor. Face surely deserved some sort of punishment which he does not receive. Thus crime is not really punished in this play, as has been abundantly made clear above. We cannot, therefore, endorse the view that "crime and punishment" could serve as an alternative title for this play (Lake and Michael, 2002).

The morality of the play

Jonson has "cast his net widely over society to include the nobleman, the countryman, the little clerk, the churchman, the small shopkeeper, etc.," to show a cross-section of society led by greed and lust to folly and loss" (Womack, 1986). Morally, the scope of the play is very wide as the faults of characters include "greed and lust; excess; triviality; coarseness, thick-headedness; false ambition; credulity; feeble submissiveness; hypocrisy; double-think; extortion; and silliness" (Barnes, 1987). These different voices are united and achieve the common motive of all characters which is "the obsessive desire for easy money."

Thus the play “depicts a whole society, ruthlessly individualistic and acquisitive” (Aurangzeb, 2019; Kay, 1995). This society is ultimately “deluded and impoverished by its own false values.” This shows that the moral of the play quite obvious. Moreover, the conspirators in the play “are certainly wicked and evil” but they have something positive about their characters (Barnes, 1987; Craig, 1999; Donaldson, 1997). The “trio of conspirators” displays wit and ingenuity which is indicative of a creative force. They create for Sir Mammon “the *novo orbe*,” (the new world) the Eldorado of his hopes: “this cobwebby London house becomes for him a fantasy place of glamour and promise.” The spell over his mind is the creation of this wit or ingenuity. They (the conspirators) create also the characters of the “cunning man”, of “Captain” Face, and of “Lungs”(the Alchemist’s assistant). Dol plays the role of the mathematical lady, mad from overmuch study of Broughton’s works. Thus the conspirators are all artists. As against them, surely with his heavy skepticism and his absurd impersonation of the Spanish Don has to real-life to offer. “Jonson’s own creative joy is with his entertainers, and that is why he lets them off lightly at the end” (Joughin, 1997; Donaldson, 1997).

CONCLUSION

To complain that the play lacks moral aspects because the fools lose their property, the rogues escape unpunished, and Face and Lovewit keep the ill-gotten gains, is to expect a crude moralism which Jonson despised. The realism of Jonson’s illusion is forced on readers strongly because the audience and readers see themselves in his knaves and fools (Womack, 1986). Like Lovewit, the audience should prefer self-interest to propriety and should turn a blind eye to Face’s tricks as long as there was something in it for them. They must feel to a degree that the foolish and vicious fantasies of the dupes are our own fantasies. The speeches of Sir Epicure, with their grandiose imagery and their powerful verse-movement; sweep the audience off their feet and they fall under their spell. In short, Jonson is a genial moralist in this play. He provided no punishment for villainy but compels the audience to recognize that they themselves have in them the same potentialities for vice and folly which are found in the characters of the play.

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 contributed chiefly to the gathering and arrangement of data. Author 2 as a behavioural science student analyzed the

moral aspect of the story while author 3 analyzed the paper as linguist reviewer.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any sort of conflict of interest with anyone or anything.

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