Play's the Thing: A Study of Games in the Alchemist

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by CAROL A. CARR

ALTHOUGH much admired, *The Alchemist* has always presented certain problems for the critic. How did Jonson intend us to understand his play? Is it a comedy or a satire? Is Lovewit to be applauded or condemned? Such debates are owing largely to the intriguing mixture of tones in the play: individual passages elicit diverse responses, and it is difficult to evaluate the impact of the play as a whole. Nevertheless, developments outside the field of literature have in recent years provided new material with which to approach these questions. Games—both their theory and their practice—have become the object of study in a number of disciplines, and the resulting insights provide help in understanding Jonson's work: for *The Alchemist*, consisting of a series of interrelated games, can be seen as an exploration of man at "play."

To say that *The Alchemist* is about games is not to say that it is a frivolous work. The twentieth century has seen the increasing recognition of the importance of games in our lives, and we have come to understand that "play" can be deadly serious. Studies of games have shown that they are not occasional, isolated phenomena: the patterns of play found in childhood frolic and adult contests of skill are found as well in daily social interaction, in personal—even intimate—relationships, and in international events such as wars. Thus, games themselves, even in their simplest forms, reflect patterns which are highly significant to us.[1]

Our growing perceptions about the nature of games enable us to approach *The Alchemist* anew. The play consists almost entirely of games—of separate yet related confidence games played on a variety of gulls, and of a grand contest between the two chief rogues, Face and Subtle. These games are obviously designed as means for Jonson to present the follies and abuses of his times, yet they can yield new insights when approached from the perspectives furnished by twentieth-century studies in the psychology and aesthetics of games. Jonson was

1. Twentieth-century material on games is copious and far ranging, touching on such widely divergent fields as mathematics, psychology, and social sciences. Perhaps the two most important landmarks in the reevaluation of the role of games and play in human experience are Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and von Neumann and Morgenstern's *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. A review of game theory can be found in *Games and Decisions* by R. D. Luce and H. Raiffa. For this essay I will be drawing on two popular but quite different approaches to games, both written for the layman: Eric Berne's *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964) and Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, trans. George Steiner (New York: Harper and Row, 1970 [first edition, London: 1938]).

not anticipating such analyses; he was observing errant humanity before him and recreating the enduring patterns which only lately we have begun to label.

The individual games between the rogues and their victims demonstrate Jonson's observations of man's complex psyche. The gulls present a fascinating variety of mental types. Most interesting from this viewpoint are Dapper, Drugger, and Sir Epicure. All come to Subtle for money. Dapper wants a familiar so he can win at gambling, Drugger wants his shop set up so it will be profitable, and Sir Epicure wants the philosopher's stone so he can make gold. However, they are really attracted to Subtle's den for other reasons as well, reasons often far more important than money. This is why we shortly find Dapper waiting upon his Aunt of Faery, Drugger hoping to marry a widow, and Sir Epicure chasing Dol. The original object, money, is partly or totally obscured. The games Subtle and Face play with these gulls are aimed at their underlying psychological motivations as much as their desire for gain. For this reason the rogues are successful even when the gulls keep losing money.

Before analyzing the games being played between the rogues and these three gulls, we need a few critical terms and a schema which will help us see the psychological patterns at work. Eric Berne provides these in his well-known book, *Games People Play*, a psychoanalysis of games. Berne defines a game as "a recurring set of transactions, often repetitious, superficially plausible, with a concealed motivation."[2] He suggests that games can be analyzed by studying the ego states involved. When the Adult ego state operates, we react to experience objectively. When the Parent ego state operates, we react as our parents did or as we conceive they should have. When the Child ego state operates, we react in patterns fixed in early life. A game is ostensibly a transaction between two adults, but in reality at least one player is operating on a Child or Parent level.

Berne is primarily concerned with "unconscious games," games played by people not fully aware of what they are doing. Nevertheless, his analysis applies as well to the types of games seen in *The Alchemist*, games which he labels "angular transactions." These games are consciously planned, with the Adult in control, and are designed to yield dividends. In this category Berne places the confidence games of professional impostors as well as the games played by businessmen and reported in trade journals.[3] An example Berne gives of the latter is that of a salesman angling for a purchase who tells the customer that he probably cannot afford the item. The saleman is aiming at the Child in the customer who will think, "I'll show that arrogant fellow."[4]

2. Berne, p. 48.
3. Berne, p. 49.
4. Berne, p. 33.

The games between Face and Subtle and the various gulls are similar to Berne's example. Superficially their appeal is to the gull's desire for money; underneath they are flattering or cajoling the ever-present Child in their victim. The gulling of Dapper is a good example. On one level the game is fairly clear. Dapper comes to Subtle for a "rifling fly" so he can win on his occasional gambling outings. Subtle and Face skillfully change this desire to that of a "great" familiar and finally to a visit with the Queen of Faery (who in less than fifty lines becomes Dapper's aunt). The goal is increased each time by appealing to Dapper's greed. Subtle objects that he will win all the money in town if he gets a great familiar, and "Her Grace" is revealed to be "a lone woman, / And very rich" (I.ii.155–56).[5]

This analysis, however, does not account for all that occurs in the scene. Certainly when we first see Dapper he does not seem very concerned with money:

> I had a scurvy writ or two to make,
> And I had lent my watch last night to one
> That dines today at the sheriff's, and so was robbed
> Of my pass-time. (I.ii.5–8)

On the surface this is merely Dapper's excuse for being late, but Dapper is revealing much about himself in these lines. He is trying to pass for a man of importance—who owns a watch and knows men who dine at the sheriff's. He is presenting himself as a gallant by the language he uses—his references to his "pass-time" and his "scurvy" writ. A few lines later he drops the pretentious foreign term "chiaus." Dapper, in short, is playing man-about-town, and this game as much as his desire for money accounts for his appearance at Subtle's. Just as he "Consorts with the small poets of the time" and "can court / His mistress out of Ovid" (I.ii.52–58), Dapper displays an interest in gambling as part of his role.

This underlying reason for Dapper's visit helps make clear the other appeals besides greed which the rogues employ. For example, Face plays a companion role of gallant, as his language reveals:

> Hang him, proud stag, with his broad velvet head.
> But for your sake I'd choke ere I would change
> An article of breath with such a puck-fist! (I.ii.61–63)

Dapper's own illusions are thus confirmed by the company he keeps. Moreover, Subtle's role as a simple, fearful man who is easily gulled gives Dapper a sense of worldly know-how.

If we return then to Berne's system, we see that on one level the transaction is between adults: Dapper wishes to buy a familiar to win money. But on a second level the rogues appeal to the Child in Dapper by

5. Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974). All further references to *The Alchemist* are to this edition and will appear in the text.

assuming complementary roles to Dapper's man-about-town. The first appeal is straightforward, and Dapper should be capable of reversing himself if he sees that he is getting nowhere. However, he does not openly acknowledge his desire to be a gallant but rather pretends to himself and others that he is one. His relationship with Subtle and Face reinforces this image, and thus it is in Dapper's interest to keep the game going and to resist seeing through the obvious duplicity of the rogues. The irony is that the man who most wants to be thought worldly is the one most prime to be gulled into believing in his Aunt of Faery.

A similar pattern can be seen in the rogues' deception of Drugger, even though the gulls are quite unalike. Rather than a would-be gallant, Drugger wants to be thought of as a "good man." As a shopkeeper he seeks to please people in order to gain patronage. Although Drugger comes to Subtle for advice about setting up his business so he will thrive, he does not seek money alone but also confirmation of his own image.[6] As a result he is willing to give Subtle gifts just so he will be well thought of, and often the gulling of Drugger is simply the evocation of the shopkeeper's ideal:

> *Face.* 'Shalt give his worship a new damask suit
> Upon the premises.
> *Subtle.* O, good Captain!
> *Face.* He shall,
> He is the honestest fellow, Doctor. (II.vi.72–74)

Drugger, like all the gulls, gets no financial profit from his association with the rogues, but he does get the other satisfactions he seeks. To reinforce his picture of himself as a trustworthy man, one who above all "serves" his customers, Drugger wants someone to make demands upon him, someone to praise him, and someone to direct him. The rogues answer each of these needs. Both send him scurrying on errands, to fetch a suit, to fetch the widow, to fetch the parson. Face's role is mainly to praise him continually. He introduces him to Subtle with a long speech on his goodness and his honesty, and he constantly refers to him as "honest Abel." Subtle's role is more indirect but also more effective. In Berne's terminology, he matches the eager-to-please "Child" in Drugger with the complementary role of commanding "Parent." He does not just give Drugger trade secrets, a horoscope, and directions for setting up his shop; he totally takes over his life. Subtle uses a brisk tone and the imperative when addressing Drugger. He pretends to complete knowledge of his past and future. And in true parent fashion he shortly offers to arrange a marriage for him. It is no wonder that Drugger finds the relationship with the rogues so gratifying.

Sir Epicure Mammon is a far more complex gull than either Dapper or Drugger. Both he and Tribulation Wholesome represent grievous

6. Berne sees the confirmation of an image as a major function of games. See especially page 45.

vices in Jonson's age—the corruption of social and religious orders. Nevertheless, like the more venial gulls, Dapper and Drugger, Sir Epicure provides us a glimpse into the psychology of gulling, and his interactions with the rogues reveal a good deal about the nature of games.

Sir Epicure is the epitome of overweening ambition. Dapper's desire to be a gallant and Drugger's to be a good businessman pall beside Sir Epicure's plans for power and grandeur. As his repeated phrase "Be Rich" indicates, he at times sees himself as a god.[7] But Sir Epicure's blasphemy has another side to it which is generally overlooked, and this second element is the key to the psychology employed in his gulling. It is first clearly seen in his reactions when caught with Dol: "O, my voluptuous mind! I am justly punished" (IV.v.82). This looks forward to his last statement in the play:

> I will go mount a turnip-cart and preach
> The end o' the world, within these two months. (V.v.81–82)

Sir Epicure's ultimate judgment of himself in traditional religious terms and his determination to inflict a penance on himself do not indicate a sudden change in character. Nor is the consistency between these actions and his earlier ones to be explained merely by the fact that he is a "man of extremes,"[8] although this he is. Instead, if we take Sir Epicure's religious orthodoxy as a given, we see that it explains a good deal of his behavior which might otherwise be puzzling.

Sir Epicure, as his words and actions in the last act make explicit, views himself as a "sinner." This explains the particular form that his gulling takes, wherein he is led to believe that he is fooling a "notable, superstitious, good soul" (II.ii.102) and later that his iniquity is revealed and his hopes destroyed through divine intervention. As we have seen with Dapper and Drugger, the rogues' *modus operandi* is for Subtle to take on an opposite role (naive to gallant Dapper, commanding to servile Drugger) and for Face to take on a companion role (man-about-town, admirer of goodness). So, too, with Sir Epicure: Subtle is the pious holy man and Face is the smiling panderer. In a sense, then, Sir Epicure's gulling is an acting out of a little morality play, with the rogues assuming the proper roles to complement Sir Epicure's idea of himself.

Such an interpretation would explain Surly's characterization of Sir Epicure as

> . . . a grave sir . . .
> A wise sir, too, at other times . . . [but one who will]
> With his own oaths and arguments make hard means
> To gull himself. (II.iii.279–82)

7. See Myrddin Jones, "Sir Epicure Mammon: A Study in Spiritual Fornication," *Renaissance Quarterly*, XXII (1969), 233–42.
8. Alvin Kernan, note to V.v.82, in his edition of the play.

Sir Epicure unconsciously seeks his own "just punishment." We see this in his actions toward Dol, particularly if we compare them to Volpone's in a similar situation. Volpone's seduction of Celia, taking place in his own isolated house where she is brought by her husband, could be expected to succeed. In contrast, Sir Epicure's prospects with Dol appear risky even to himself, and Face clearly emphasizes the dangers: "If the old man should hear or see you . . . The very house, sir, would run mad" (IV.i.12–13). Sir Epicure's failure to take heed is a result of his sense of himself as a sinner who must inevitably be punished.

Sir Epicure, then, plays "lecher" the way Eric Berne suggests some people play "alcoholic": "Present experience indicates that the *payoff* in 'Alcoholic' (as is characteristic of games in general) . . . is the hangover. . . . The transactional object of the drinking, aside from the personal pleasures it brings, is to set up a situation where the Child can be severely scolded not only by the internal Parent but by any Parental figures in the environment who are interested enough to oblige."[9] Sir Epicure seeks to be caught so Subtle can scold him. (This incidentally would also explain why he enjoys Surly's companionship, for the gamester spends most of his time upbraiding the knight.)

In his treatment of Sir Epicure, then, Jonson probes the psychology of gulling in depth and reveals a basic principle that is frequently seen at work in rogue plays: the gull actively participates in his own deception, for unconsciously he seeks to be chastised. Modern psychology has shown Jonson's insights here to be valid, and this is one reason that the play, for all its topicality, rings true. For the Jacobeans, however, the pattern had moral implications as well. It makes gulling a form of punishment and the rogue, for all his culpability, a servant to a just end. Thus the ironic pattern of self-punishment reveals a moral order at work in men, despite their own base aims. Jonson's views here are similar to those Middleton developed in working with the rogue: that sin is its own punishment, and wit turns finally on itself.

II

THE RICH variety of gulls in *The Alchemist* and the differing treatments Jonson accords them account for the widely divergent critical views of the play—seen both as Jonson's most cynical and as his gayest.[10] Certainly in the psychology that lies behind Sir Epicure's actions, we see Jonson suggesting the serious implications of the rogues' amusing games. However, on the whole, the tone of the play is much closer to the jovial humor we get in Jonson's treatment of Dapper and Drugger

9. Berne, pp. 75–76.

10. It is judged his most cynical by Gabriele Bernhard Jackson in *Vision and Judgment in Ben Jonson's Drama* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 67–68, 87–92. J. B. Steane supports the opposite view in his introduction, *The Alchemist* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 1–26.

than it is to the darker humor associated with Sir Epicure. This is because, although Sir Epicure is the central gull in the play, he is not the central figure. *The Alchemist* instead focuses on that "venture tripartite"—Face, Subtle, and Dol. The trio of rogues dominates. At least one of them appears in all but three scenes of the play, and when they are on stage, they generally monopolize the dialogue.[11] Even the loquacious Sir Epicure is often reduced to half-liners in their presence. As a result, the tone of the play is largely set by the rogues, and the more serious implications developed through the individual games are not emphasized.

The central position of the rogues in the plot gives unity to what could be merely a collection of gullings. Jonson establishes in the first act a game between Subtle and Face to "prove today who shall shark best" (I.i.160). According to these terms, all the separate gullings are a part of this larger game. Thus, although each can be seen as revealing in itself a sharp satirical portrait or a significant psychological insight, we must always view the gullings from another context as well—as demonstrations of the rogues' skill, as points in an ongoing game.[12] Moreover, this larger game is not given the moral implications that the individual gullings are. It is presented as an open contest of skill, like an athletic event between equally-matched opponents. As a result, the audience is encouraged to adopt the attitude of an amused spectator towards it, and this attitude colors the audience's reaction to the play as a whole.

To understand fully the effect which the rogues' contest has on *The Alchemist*, we need to explore the idea of game from another viewpoint. The psychological approach continues to provide insights—as we shall see, the outcome of the game is based largely on the mental assumptions of the two combatants; however, psychological motivations are not emphasized here to the extent that they were in the gulling of Dapper, Drugger, and Sir Epicure. Although the rogues do try to manipulate each other, the game between them is basically an open contest entered into for their own amusement. The approach which is most rewarding here is aesthetic—a study of how their game delights us as a performance and how it affects the play's tone and our feelings towards the rogues.

Of use in this approach is another study of games which preceded Berne's and on which he drew. Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* is broader in scope and different in emphasis. Whereas Berne noted briefly the aesthetics of games when he wrote of the elimination of wasteful moves and the resulting streamlining of form,[13] Huizinga explores this element in depth. His study dif-

11. The exceptions are scenes II.i, III.i, and V.i (and in the first Face has an offstage line). The rogues, of course, do not dominate in *all* the scenes in which they appear.

12. Joyce Van Dyke suggests that the points of the game are kept quite literally, that the rogues tally up the amount of money each gets from the gulls he himself has recruited. See "The Games of Wits in *The Alchemist*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, XIX (Spring 1979), 259.

13. Berne, pp. 55–56.

fers from others, he states, in that they ignore the "profoundly aesthetic quality" of play.[14] Huizinga is not so much interested in diagraming forms of games as in isolating the "play-mood" which is at their heart.

Huizinga's definition of play provides a useful way of looking at the contest between the two rogues:

> We might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.[15]

Subtle and Face "play" in much the same way. The rogues have been gulling dupes for some time when *The Alchemist* opens, and we are to assume that Subtle and Dol, at the very least, will continue to gull others after it closes. But the contest between Subtle and Face is a different matter. It is carefully limited to this day and this house. It is entered into voluntarily but formally, probably with a handshake upon the word "Agreed" (I.i.160). The rules are unspoken but clearly implied in the references to "articles" and "instruments." Most important, however, is that unlike the gulling of the dupes, the contest between the rogues is begun for its own sake, for the "fun" of it, without the ulterior purpose of gaining money.[16] Thus it is a kind of ornament on the basic business of the day. Despite this fact—or perhaps because of it—it is played with vigor and intensity.

The rogues' contest opens with a dare—"prove today who shall shark best"—and daring is a pronounced trait in all their actions. The very fun of the gullings seems to lie in their risk, in the intriguing element of danger. Thus Surly is approached even though he threatens to prove intractable merely because "to ha' gulled him / Had been a mast'ry" (III.iii.7–8). So, too, the rogues take on all comers, and each gulling is pushed to its absolute limits. In consequence, the trio has increasing difficulties handling all their clients, and a remarkable tension builds. The best analogy for the feeling produced is the suspense we experience when watching a juggler add ball after ball to his act: we wait for, although we do not wish for, all to come tumbling down. We identify with the juggler in his difficulties, and when he succeeds, we experience a sense of exhilaration. So, too, in *The Alchemist*. The possible difficulties produce an excitement which makes us forget ethics and identify with the rogues. Then when the hardest trick is performed, when even Surly is turned away, tension is released in a flood of joy.

The style with which the rogues approach their tasks is another prod-

14. Huizinga, p. 20.
15. Huizinga, p. 32.
16. This distinction between the "serious" hoodwinking of the dupes and the "playful" contest between Face and Subtle is based upon the dominant mood of the games. It should not be pushed too far, for the essence of game is the paradoxical *mixture* of seriousness and play. For this reason Huizinga placed "not serious" in quotations in his definition of play above. See also Berne, pp. 18, 49.

uct of the playful attitude which their game encourages. Rather than simply milking the gulls for their money, they continually embroider on their roles, doing far more than is necessary. An example is Face's description of Dapper as he introduces him to Subtle. To lure the young man on, Face evokes the clerk's ideal of himself as a gallant; however, it is for his own pleasure that Face also skillfully weaves into his account the actual banality of Dapper's life. Thus we learn that Dapper, in addition to consorting with the poets and studying Ovid, is "the sole hope of his old grandmother" and "has his ciph'ring perfect" (I.ii.53–55). These elements are for Face's and Subtle's benefit—and ultimately for ours. Here we experience a different sort of pleasure, not from the release of tension but from delight in the aesthetic elements which the game takes on.

The style with which the rogues carry on their gullings is not unrelated to the daring with which they approach them. Their embroidering on their roles, their elaborate, witty speeches, are an *overdoing*, and hence always threaten, however slightly, to topple the entire edifice. In a sense each *double entendre* dares the gull to open his eyes. Moreover, the rogues' elaboration is often at cross purposes with the pressing needs of the moment. They are able to pun wittily and speak charmingly while at the same time they carry on a very exacting and very risky confidence game and when at any moment another gull may appear. The audience's pleasure in the rogues' style, then, is closely tied up with its pleasure in their audacity. It is the pleasure of seeing wit produced under pressure and form created out of disorder.[17] It is the pleasure in the rogues' *sprezzatura*, their achievement of a style which belies its own difficulty. It is akin to the pleasure we receive from a poem composed in a complex stanza form.

This enjoyment which the audience derives from the rogues' game affects in turn its feelings toward them. First, caught up in the dynamics of the contest, the audience suspends judgment. Moral standards are not so much bent as ignored; we are simply not interested in judging. However, our feelings toward the rogues as a result of the game go further than this neutral stance. We do not just tolerate them, we begin to applaud them. There are two basic reasons for these feelings. For one, there is the positive value which style and daring hold. A person who can create something aesthetically pleasing in form or language cannot help but be admired. We grant artistic "license" to such a person and can overlook to some extent the dubiousness of his methods.

17. Robert E. Knoll in "How to Read *The Alchemist*," *College English*, XXI (1960), 456–60, has pointed out that the play relies heavily on repetition, that each gulling is kept separate and follows a simple pattern of introduction, neglect, and resolution. This analysis is basically true of the play's form (although I would argue that there is more interweaving than he suggests in the second half of the play), but it does not accurately reflect the way we feel in reading or seeing it. This is because we see the action from the rogues' viewpoint, and whereas Jonson may be *neglecting* the gulls we are always *expecting* them. That is, we perceive simultaneously both the simple orderly form and the great disorder—potential or overcome—which lies right behind it.

More important, however, is the rogue's vitality. The tension and the resultant exhilaration we feel when we identify with the rogue and play with difficult circumstances make us feel that we are living life fully. This is paradoxical, for the game after all focuses on narrow interests and is entirely nonessential. Nevertheless, because it is so absorbing, so intense, it seems to amplify life. We feel that the rogue's faculties are working to their fullest, that he is cramming more "life" into a shorter period. A similar "cramming" effect is achieved through the rogue's language. His exuberant, playful—yet artful—flood of words has, as Lester A. Beaurline notes, "intrinsic vitality."[18]

Finally, the game itself confers a sense of rightness on the rogue. Huizinga has cogently summed up this idea: "Though play as such is outside the range of good and bad, the element of tension imparts to it a certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player's prowess: his courage, tenacity, resources, and last but not least, his spiritual powers—his 'fairness'; because, despite his ardent desire to win, he must stick to the rules of the game."[19] Later he qualifies the necessity for fairness: the belief that rules should be kept, he notes, is relatively modern. Fraudulently outwitting another can itself become a game, and "winning *as such* is, for the archaic mind, proof of truth and rightness."[20] *The Alchemist* plays upon this feeling. That we respond positively to it, and to ancient folklore, suggests that our modern sense of rules is still somewhat superficial.

The sense of the "rightness" of the winner becomes increasingly important in the second half of the play as the rivalry of the rogues is intensified and Face gradually proves himself the superior. He gains the edge in three specific situations which serve to mark the progress of the contest—the handling of Dame Pliant, of Surly, and of Lovewit.

The contest between Face and Subtle over Dame Pliant is concluded in a single revealing scene. Act IV, scene iii, is divided into a two-part confrontation between the rogues. In the first half Face openly importunes Subtle to give him the widow, offering "any composition." Subtle counters with a refusal and in the end smugly concludes that "We must keep Face in awe." In the second interview the positions are reversed. A new condition, the need to find a prostitute for the Don, is used skillfully by Face to force Subtle to give over the widow—with no "composition." In the end Subtle must acknowledge Face the winner and "a terrible rogue!"

Face's victory here is not just one of maneuvering. He wins as well because of his attitude: "It is but one man more" (l. 66). This is a questionable stance, especially for a Jacobean audience. Nevertheless, within

18. L. A. Beaurline, *Jonson and Elizabethan Comedy: Essays in Dramatic Rhetoric* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1978), pp. 166–67.
19. Huizinga, p. 29.
20. Huizinga, p. 103.

the play it is given tacit approval, for it is shown as superior to Subtle's false honor. Subtle's horror at the idea of being a cuckold is out of keeping with his position as a rogue attempting to marry the widow on false pretenses for her money. Moreover, up to now sex for him has evidently been a matter of drawing lots for the use of Dol Common (I.i.178–79). His sudden scruples appear, then, to arise from the pretentiousness which has been characteristic of him from the opening when he demanded priority among the rogues. Subtle's pride distorts his objectivity. In contrast, Face's pragmatism, while almost appalling, is open-eyed, and this self-honesty wins for him the widow—and the audience's approval.

Face's superiority becomes more obvious in his handling of Surly. Whereas Subtle capitulates quickly to the gamester, Face is scarcely daunted. He manages to slip away in the middle of being lectured and returns with Kastril to outface Surly and manipulate the gulls into opposing him. That this victory is not just over Surly but over Subtle as well is made clear by a pointed comparison:

> *Face.* Come, Subtle,
> Thou art so down upon the least disaster!
> How wouldst thou ha' done, if I had not helped thee out? (IV.vii.92–94)

In this instance, too, Face's superiority is shown to lie largely in his attitude. His victory is more through sheer gall than skill: he has Surly shouted down and run out of the house. Face's audacity is his most marked trait, just as Subtle's is his pretentiousness. Subtle refers to Face as "this impetuous Face" (IV.iii.103) and "this peremptory Face" (V.iv.79), and this judgment is confirmed by Face's actions throughout. Here we see that, whereas Subtle is "down," Face remains buoyant, and this spirit keeps him in control and brings him victory.

Face's final defeat of Subtle comes as a result of their last challenge, the return of the master to the house. As in the handling of Dame Pliant, Face's victory here is given added piquancy by Subtle's smug confidence that it is he who is doing the maneuvering and the outwitting. Subtle breaks his word and tells Dol everything, and the two plot to give Face the slip. To make all look good, Subtle submits to an inventory of their gains and to turning over the keys to Face. Only then does Face reveal his deal with Lovewit, dismiss the two rogues, and end the game. It is flexibility that wins Face this final victory. Subtle must over the wall, but Face can shave and turn Jeremy, respectfully offering his master a young widow as compensation for any trouble. Face's ability is comically underscored in the last scenes of the play as the gulls stand before him swearing how they will find Face, as the neighbors affirm that "Jeremy / Is a very honest fellow" (V.ii.37–38), and as Surly says more than he realizes: "This's a new Face!" (V.iii.21).

Indeed, Face's name sums up this ability as it does all the other abili-

ties he demonstrates in the three matches with Subtle. The key meaning of "Face" in the play, of course, lies in the character's ability to change costume and role readily. But Face illustrates other senses of the word as well. If it is changing character which wins him his final victory, it is "freedom from indications of shame" which secures the widow in his first bout. And, finally, it is his audacity, his "impudence," or "cheek," his ability to "carry through by effrontery" that wins for him his climactic victory over Surly in Act IV.[21] To be Face is to be the best rogue, to view society objectively, free from its prejudices and pretentions; to be always flexible; and to carry everything through with an audacious spirit. These are the traits of the rogue and the traits which confer victory in this game and to some extent in all games.

Face, of course, must yield the widow and hence honors to Lovewit at the end, who can be seen as the real victor. But this does not seem to be how Jonson meant us to view the play. Face has dominated our attention from the beginning, and he has the last words. He is obviously the central character, the one whose abilities are most demonstrated. Lovewit, in contrast, does not enter until the fifth act and is not developed fully. He is used rather as a means of pointing out the winner of the contest and of judging the outcome. He represents the spirit with which we are to approach the play, and he looks back to such genial judges as Justice Clement.

In addition, Jonson suggests that Face and Lovewit are not competitors at all but in alliance and that their real opponent is Surly. Thus, although Face has "won" the widow, we are made to feel that it was Surly whom Lovewit took her from:

> *Surly.* How! Have I lost her, then?
> *Lovewit.* Were you the don, sir?
> Good faith, now she does blame y' extremely, and says
> You swore, and told her you had ta'en the pains
> To dye your beard, and umber o'er your face,
> Borrowéd a suit and ruff, all for her love;
> And then did nothing. What an oversight
> And want of putting forward, sir, was this! (V.v.49–55)

This opposition between Lovewit and Surly is important to the play's exploration of games. The two characters, as their names suggest, are contrasting types. A lover of wit appreciates resourcefulness and ingenuity; wit is associated with amusement, imagination, and skilled articulation. In contrast, surly means rudeness, sullenness of manner, and a refusal to be sociable. In terms of the game world a surly person is a "spoil-sport," one who refuses to play, who breaks the illusion of the game[22]—and such, indeed, is Surly's role in the play.

Lovewit's speech to Surly points out how the latter lost the prize,

21. All meanings in quotations for the word "face" are from the *OED*.
22. Huizinga, p. 30.

Dame Pliant, by refusing to play the game. In donning the Spanish costume Surly was initiating a counter gulling which could have succeeded. Had he carried the widow off, he would have beaten the rogues at their own game. Instead, after winning Dame Pliant, Surly opted to resume his identity and to break up the game. As a result the gulls were willing to help eject him from the house, for the stopping of the game would have meant the shattering of their illusions, and this they would not allow. On Lovewit's return he was faced with a similar choice: he could call the authorities or he could carry off the widow. Lovewit pursues the course Surly rejected; he joins in, rather than breaks up, the game, and he wins.

The opposition between Lovewit and Surly functions to reinforce the lesson of the central game between Subtle and Face, for Lovewit is shown to win because he has the same abilities as his servant. Like Face he quickly dons a costume, shifts role, and wins the widow. Like Face he is free from shame. He can "strain . . . his own candor" (V.v.151–52) and is free of that "foolish vice of honesty" (V.v.84). Like Face he is audacious, matching Kastril quarrel for quarrel, threatening Ananias with a cudgel, and handling Drugger by simply beating him off stage.

These similarities between master and servant have ramifications for the play as a whole. As a man of some stature, operating outside the world of the confidence game, Lovewit shows an application of underworld principles to society at large. He is a reputable man who adopts the disreputable methods of his servant. Moreover, in so doing, he succeeds where the more honest Surly fails. Lovewit and Surly's opposition thus points to the significance of the rogues' games: the actions in Lovewit's house, seemingly so removed, reveal in microcosm the corruption of the larger world. Such implications arise, however, at the play's close and are not developed. Lovewit's dishonesty is glossed over by presenting him as a madcap and by opposing him to a gamester of disreputable background. It was not until *Bartholomew Fair* that Jonson worked out the implications of the rogues' games in society.

In *The Alchemist* he was generally content to look at games in and of themselves, as fascinating patterns which men create. The play places the rogues at center and considers the game primarily from their point of view. As a result, although the rogues do function as satirists in revealing the vices and follies of their victims, and although we do see in the underlying psychology of gulling the illusions of men that make them vulnerable, the final emphasis is on the all-absorbing pleasures games afford. We identify with the rogues and experience the exhilaration of difficulties taken on and overcome and of beauty created out of the base. The play incorporates many serious criticisms of the Jacobean society and employs at times a scathing satire, but still—in essence—*play* is the thing in *The Alchemist*.

Alexandria, Virginia