

Jonson's Comic and Satirical Genius: An Analysis of Satiric Portraits and Comic Elements in the Alchemist

Shamaila Amir¹, Fayyaz Ahmad²

¹Fellow of PhD (Linguistics), HIESS, Hamdard University, Karachi, Pakistan

²Fellow of MS (Behavioural Sciences), NUST, Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract: The Alchemist is a rich and sparkling comedy. It keeps the audience amused and laughing from beginning to end. It contains the comedy of situation, the comedy arising from the exercise of wit, and the comedy of character. It is essentially a satirical comedy which contains a number of satiric portraits and which is, on the whole, a satire on human greed, covetousness, lust, and credulity. The objective of the paper is therefore to analyze the comic and satirical genius of Ben Jonson through The Alchemist. The paper concludes that the Alchemist provides a feast of laughter to the audience.

Keywords: Jonson's comic genius, Jonson's satirical genius, satiric portraits, comic elements, The Alchemist, Ben Jonson, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Certain situations in this play contain hilarious comedy. When Dapper is pinched by Subtle and Face, he is being pinched by the fairies who have come under the orders of their Queen to collect from him whatever cash or valuables he has. Dapper, who is at this time blindfolded, believes what he is told, and throws away everything that he has got. The situation here becomes almost farcical, with Dapper confessing that he has got a spur-royal, and then confessing that he has also got a half-crown of gold about his wrist. Dapper is soon afterwards gagged and stowed away in the toilet. Subsequently, Dapper is given a fly which is supposed to be the familiar or the attendant spirit he had asked for, and he is directed to wear this fly on his wrist. Another comic situation occurs when Surly appears at Subtle's bath-house in the disguise of a Spanish Don. Subtle and Face really think him to be a Spanish Don who can speak only Spanish and who knows no English. The situation here is characterized by irony. The audience know the reality, and so does Surly himself; but Face and Subtle are under the wrong impression that the man, who has come to them to be provided with a woman for his sexual gratification, is a Spanish viceroy. Face searches Surly's pockets to find out if there are any coins for him to pick. A little later, it is Subtle who begins to search Surly's pockets with the intention of robbing him of money, but now Surly discloses his true identity and, seizing Subtle, given him a sound beating. Then there are the various disguises of Face, and these too are comic. He is Captain Face to Dapper and Drugger; he is Lungs to Mammon and Surly; but in reality he is a butler in the employ of Lovewit. At the end, when he has shaved off his beard and is wearing the livery of a butler, none of the fellows, who had come into such a close contact with him, can recognize him. Dol's disguises are also comic. Actually she is a mere prostitute, but she first disguises herself as a lord's sister who is subject to fits of madness, and subsequently she disguises herself as the Queen of Fairies. Even Subtle appears to the Anabaptists in a guise different from that in which he appears to his other clients, and once he appears as priest of the Queen of Fairies (Farley-Hills, 1981; Kay, 1995).

ANALYSIS

THE COMEDY OF CHARACTER: A SATIRICAL PORTRAYAL OF DAPPER

The comedy of character in this play takes the form of satire. There are a number of satirical portraits in this play. In several cases, it is the avarice of the characters which is satirized; in one case it is a character's lust as well as avarice which is satirized; in twocases it is the hypocrisy of the characters,

besides their avarice, which is the target of satire; in one case city manners are satirized; and in one other case we get a bit of satire on women in general (Jensen, 1985). The first satiric portrait is that of Dapper. Dapper is a lawyer's clerk who comes to the doctor or the alchemist in order to obtain from him a familiar or an attendant spirit who would enable Dapper to win money at all forms of gambling: at house-races, at card-parties, and at dice-parties. Dapper would like to give up his own profession and become a whole time gambler. Dapper is willing to pay the doctor whatever fee is demanded from him. Face coaxes Dapper to pay Subtle an adequate fee for the favour which the doctor is going to do to him. Dapper's greed makes him so credulous that he even believes the fiction that the Queen of Fairies has a great liking for him and that he is her nephew whom she would certainly bless and to whom she would show much favour. Dapper feels very happy to be told that he would win so much at cards that it would seem that the spirits of the dead alchemists, John and Isaac Holland, have come back to live in Dapper's body. When Face says that the Queen of Fairies is a lone woman and very rich, and that she would do strange things for Dapper because she likes him, Dapper fully believes this fantastic lie (Amir & Aurangzeb, 2020; Aurangzeb, 2019). Nor does Dapper doubt the prescription which Subtle offers to him for the sharpening of his senses. Subtle asks him to put three drops of vinegar into his nose, two drops into his mouth, and in one into either ear, and also to bathe his fingers' ends, and to wash his eyes. Dapper goes home and carries out these instructions. On his second visit, he is blindfolded and asked to throw away every valuable that he carries on his person because such is the desire of the Queen of Fairies. Dapper proves to be so credulous that he does not suspect either Face or Subtle of any bad motive even when they blindfold him, gag him, and stow him away in the closet. Even towards the end, when Dapper is rescued from the toilet, he does not feel suspicious of the intentions of Subtle and Face. On the contrary, he goes home perfectly satisfied with the assurance that the Queen of Fairies would leave some of her property to him. In fact, Dapper now decides to draft his will, according to which, he would leave all his income to the Queen of Fairies. Dapper is, indeed, a most amusing gull (McCanles, 1977). 1a coin of the value of fifteen shillings, 2namely Subtle

A SATIRICAL PORTRAYAL OF DRUGGER

Drugger is as credulous and gullible as Dapper. He is obsessed with a desire to become rich. He tells Subtle that he is going to build a new shop and that he would like to know where exactly to install the door, where to fix the shelves, and where to put his boxes and pots. He fully believes whatever he is told by Subtle and Face. Subtle speaks very cleverly to him about a star on his forehead, about his long ears and the spots in his teeth indicating that he is a very lucky man. Drugger is such an idiot that his suspicions about Subtle are not aroused even when Subtle directs him to bury a magnet underneath the threshold of his shop in order to attract customers wearing spurs. Drugger is even inclined to believe that, in course of time, he would himself be in a position to manufacture the philosopher's stone and therefore, he gives Subtle whatever money he is urged by Face to pay him (Amir & Aurangzeb, 2020; Aurangzeb, 2019). On the next occasion Drugger brings a certain quantity of tobacco for Subtle, and is asked to bring a damask suit for him also. Drugger not only believes the authenticity of the absurd prescriptions suggested by Subtle to him for the success of his business, but also the assurance given to him by Face that the rich young widow, Dame Pliant, would be married to him. Drugger procures a Spanish suit as directed by Face, and then even brings a priest to perform the marriage ceremony. Actually, Face is himself planning to marry Dame Pliant after disguising himself as a Spanish Don, and that is why he had asked Drugger to bring a Spanish dress and a priest, but Drugger continues to harbor the illusion that Dame Pliant would be married to him. Eventually, Dame Pliant gets married to Lovewit and, when Drugger comes to claim his rights, he is driven away by Lovewit (Brown, 2011).

A SATIRICAL PORTRAYAL OF SIR EPICURE MAMMON

There is a satirical touch in the very name Epicure Mammon. An Epicure is a person given to leading a life of luxury, and especially fond of delicious foods, while Mammon is the name of one of the angels who

fell from Paradise, an angel who was obsessed by thoughts of gold. The man who has been given the name of Epicure Mammon in this play is obsessed by thoughts of the philosopher's stone which would make him fabulously rich, and he is at the same time obsessed by desire for endless sexual pleasure. Mammon proves to be even more credulous and gullible than Dapper and Druggier (Amir & Aurangzeb, 2020; Aurangzeb, 2019). The audience is amused at Mammon's extravagant claims regarding the philosopher's stone, and at his phantasies regarding the life of king he would lead. He tells his friend Surly that, as soon as he gets the philosopher's stone from the alchemist, he would convert every metallic article in his house into gold, and that, in fact, he would purchase the copper and tin mines in Devonshire and Cornwall in order to be able to convert into gold all the copper and tin that he would obtain from the mines in those two regions. He says to Surly that "the flower of the sun", "the perfect ruby which we call elixir", has the power to confer honour, love, respect, long life, and victory upon its possessor. In eight and twenty days, this elixir can transform an old man of eighty into a child. By taking a tiny bit of this elixir once a week, an old man can become young and would then be able to beget sons and daughters as robust as giants. According to Mammon, the philosopher's stone has the power to combat all infections and cure all diseases coming from any causes whatsoever. Even when Surly refuses to believe in the very existence of the elixir or the philosopher's stone, Mammon continues to speak in eloquent terms about the wonders which the philosopher's stone can work (Womack, 1986). Mammon undoubtedly speaks great poetry, but the contents of his speeches are most absurd and preposterous. He even goes to the extent of saying that all the mythological stories about Jason's fleece Pythagoras's golden thigh, Pandora's Box, the garden of Hesperus, the story of Midas who could convert everything into gold with a touch of his hand, are all allegorical accounts of the wonders which the philosopher's stone worked in ancient times. Mammon becomes rapturous when he is told by Face that in three hours Mammon would be in a position to witness "projection" (McCanles, 1977). Mammon then makes a couple of more speeches in which he describes the sexual pleasures and the pleasures of eating delicious and costly foods, which he would enjoy through the wealth obtained by means of the philosopher's stone. He would maintain a harem of wives and concubines, equal in number to those whom King Solomon maintained in ancient times. Solomon too had the philosopher's stone in his possession, says Mammon. Mammon would grow so strong with the power of the philosopher's stone that he would be able to perform sexual intercourse with fifty women in the course of one night. Indeed, these speeches are grandiose in tone describing the grandiose visions which Mammon has at this time seeing of his future. In reality, nothing could be more preposterous than these speeches, despite their eloquence and their poetic quality. The inflated language and the verbosity of these speeches make them simply absurd. Later, Mammon speaks in a similar inflated manner to Dol who has been introduced to him as a lord's daughter. The glowing compliments which he pays to Dol, not knowing that she is a mere prostitute, show how gullible this man is (Amir & Aurangzeb, 2020; Aurangzeb, 2019).

THE SATIRICAL PORTRAYALS OF TRIBULATION WHOLESOME AND ANANIAS

Tribulation and Ananias are the two Anabaptists who come to Subtle on behalf of the brethren at Amsterdam in order to obtain from him the philosopher's stone which he had promised to them. The manner in which these two men have been portrayed, is highly satirical. The audience is greatly amused when Tribulation argues that even wicked means are justified if the end is a noble one. He tells Ananias that the children of perdition are oft-times made instruments to promote holy causes. Subtle may be a wicked man, but the Anabaptists would lose nothing and gain everything by making use of this wicked man and getting from him the philosopher's stone which would have the power to restore the clergymen who had been excommunicated by the king on the basis of the laws passed in 1604 (Donaldson, 1997; Kay, 1995). Thus here the hypocrisy of the Anabaptists is exposed because every true religion for bids making use of evil means even to gain noble ends. Tribulation and Ananias believe Subtle implicitly when Subtle talks about the advantages that would accrue to the Anabaptists through the philosopher's stone

which he would soon place in their hands. Subtle then goes on cleverly to poke fun at the Anabaptists by pointing out that they belong to a sect which adopts many malpractices and many crooked devices to exercise its authority over its followers. Subtle says that the Anabaptists are in the habit of exploiting Puritan wives and widows, that they take every opportunity of robbing people of their money by imposing fines on them for the slightest infringements of the religious code, that they are in the habit of eating heavy and sumptuous meals at night in order to be able to keep a fast on the following day without suffering the least inconvenience. Subtle also says that the Anabaptists are in the habit of telling lies in their fits of religious zeal, and that they try to win renown and attract the attention of people by giving such names to the members of their sect as Tribulation, Persecution, Restraint, and Long-Patience (Womack, 1986). Of course, Tribulation and Ananias remain quite impervious to the satirical implications of Subtle's speeches (Brown, 2011). When Subtle speaks to Ananias about the "orphans' goods", it becomes clear from Ananias's reply that the Anabaptists do not mind entering into shady deals. The contrast between the Anabaptists' pretended piety and their essential dishonesty is very amusing, indeed. It is also greatly amusing when the audience finds Ananias agreeing with Subtle that there is a difference between the coining of dollars and the casting of dollars. Subsequently, Ananias comes again and informs Subtle that the brethren at Amsterdam have to the conclusion that the casting of dollars is perfectly lawful. Indeed, the satire on the Anabaptists or the puritans in this play is very sharp and scathing (McCanles, 1977; Barnes, 1987).

A SATIRICAL PORTRAYAL OF KASTRIL AND DAME PLIANT

Kastril is a young man from the countryside. He has come to the city of London in order to learn city manners, especially the art of quarrelling. In the portrayal of Kastril, the author's intention was to satirize the habits of the gallant of the time. These gallants had got into the habit of smoking tobacco, and they had also got into the habit of quarrelling for fashion's sake (Brown, 2011). These gallants were known as "the angry boys." Kastril wants to learn the art by which one can quarrel and then promptly withdraw from the quarrel if it threatens to become dangerous to oneself. So far is the portrayal of Dame Pliant concerned, Jonson seems to have satirized women in general. Dame Pliant is a very submissive woman, having no will identity of her own (Craig, 1999) like a puppet. She is controlled completely by her brother, and she is thus a nonentity. Jonson had a dislike of court ladies, and his dislike seems to have been extended to the entire female sex. Here, therefore, he seems to be poking fun at women in general. The implication is that women have no minds of their own (Amir & Aurangzeb, 2020; Aurangzeb, 2019; Brown, 2011).

A SATIRICAL PORTRAYAL OF LOVEWIT

The portrayal of Lovewit is satirical too. We would have expected this respectable-seeming citizen to have taken serious note of his butler's criminal activities during his absence from the town, but he proves to be as unscrupulous as Face himself. Lovewit promptly makes a deal with Face when Face suggests that Lovewit should get married to Dame Pliant and should gloss over Face's criminal activities. The audience enjoys a hearty laugh finding Lovewit readily accepting the bribe offered to him by his butler and thus bringing himself down to the butler's level (Amir & Aurangzeb, 2020; Aurangzeb, 2019).

THE SATIRICAL PORTRAYAL OF THE CONSPIRATORS

The satire on the three conspirators in the play is as amusing as the satire on the dupes (McCanles, 1977). The author makes his audience laugh at Subtle who is a mere quack but who sets up practice as an alchemist, claiming also to be a palmist, an astrologer, and a physiognomist. It is also amusing how Dol who is a mere prostitute, but pretends to be a lord's sister studying mathematics and metaphysics under Subtle's supervision. Face the butler proves to be as cunning a rogue as Subtle is. He is, indeed, an unscrupulous villain who would employ all sorts of tracks to rob people of their money. All the wit, the ingenuity, and the highspirits of these conspirators fail to neutralize the devilry of which they are capable

(Craig, 1999). It is true that Jonson does not adequately punish Subtle and Dol at the end and that he allows Face to go scot-free, but those only show that Jonson is also having a laugh at the society which fails to take cognizance of the nefarious activities of many of its members (Amir & Aurangzeb, 2020; Aurangzeb, 2019).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Jonson's characters are all satiric portraits of Renaissance aspiration, of the belief that man can make anything he will of himself and of his world, that he can strom heaven and become one with the gods, or make of earth a new paradise (McCanles, 1977; Brown, 2011).

Human nature is considered by Jonson's characters as endlessly plastic and therefore subject to the alchemical process. The willingness of the various characters to accept the apparent for the real makes them immediately ridiculous. Just as they believe that the stone will really turn iron to gold, so they will accept the quack Subtle as a genuine alchemist, the prostitute Dol as the Queen of Fairies, and the villainous Face as Captain Face or as "Lungs."

What the fools will do for others, they will, of course, do for themselves; and so the lawyer's clerk believes that he will become a thriving gambler and man about town, the tobacconist that he will become a prosperous merchant and be married to the rich young widow, the knight that he will become as rich as King Solomon so as to maintain a large harem of wives and concubines, the country rustic that he will become a young man of fashion by learning the art of quarrelling, the Anabaptists that they will become temporal lords in addition to being the lords spiritual.

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