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Ben Jonson

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Benjamin Jonson (June 11, 1572 - August 6, 1637) was an English dramatist, actor and poet. He is best known for his plays Volpone and The Alchemist and his lyric poems as well. A good friend of William Shakespeare. His works had influenced many poets and writers such Jacobean and Caroline.

The Alchemist Details

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From Reader Review The Alchemist for online ebook

Alexander Rolfe says

Less accessible than most Elizabethan plays, but worth the effort. The ending is especially fun. I would really like to see it performed. And soon-- before I forget all the explanations from the footnotes. Parts of it remind me of various diets and cures being sold today. Also, the prologue's reference to "manners" being called "humours" shows we're not the first generation to be caught blaming our behavior on our biology (my brain made me do it!).

Jason says

A servant, a thief, and a whore walk into a bar.....and that's essentially how this rollicking good comedy from Elizabethan England gets started. The servant's master has gone out of town for a few months to escape the plague, and so the servant goes to a local establishment, finds a local troublemaker and prostitute, and convinces them to set up camp with him in his master's house, pretend to be an alchemist and his assistants, and rip people off. It's a brilliant plan, and relies, of course, on the gullibility and greed of the "customers" who are ready to pay anything for the power to control life and death itself. The play begins with the two men arguing over who is more crucial to the success of the scam and should therefore take more of the spoils. Before long, there's a knock at the door. Another customer! It's the knight, who has been promised the ability to turn all metals into gold! How will they get his money without delivering the goods? Quick, you go put on your costume! You, go get the door! And the play goes on from there.

What a relief to read an Elizabethan comedy that isn't about romance or courtship for once. All props to Shakespeare, naturally, but The Alchemist feels very different from Shakespearean comedy, and I found it refreshing for that reason. This play is not about love or feelings at all. It is the opposite of sentimental. It's about a wonderful scam, and the idiocy of the scammed, and the cleverness of the scammers. The play follows the various lies and schemes cooked up by the three crooks, taking time to reveal the strains building in their own relationship as well as the twisted motivations and desires of the customers who stop by. The trio promises one thing to one person, then another thing to another person, and as happens in any good comedy, the lies begin to collide, contradict each other, and reveal holes in their false identities, and the whole thing threatens at every moment to blow up in their faces. Some of the customers begin to get suspicious. Some begin to suspect the existence of the others. If they meet and trade information, all is lost. Two of the trio conspire together to betray the third, while a different pair in the trio conspire together to betray a different third. You can be sure that, by the last act, all the customers have started banging at the door one after the other demanding explanations, and the way the servant, who has played both his customers and his partners like a fiddle, spontaneously juggles and steers his way through these lies with everybody present in the same room is really quite astonishing. And does the master suddenly come home in the middle of all of this, ahead of schedule, right into the middle of a heated argument between his servant and a bunch of strangers demanding their money back? I'll leave that for you to discover.

This play is great fun. Like any piece from the period, it requires time and effort to get through, but get yourself a well-annotated copy (Penguin or Oxford will do), and you'll find an old play worthy of the best con-artist farces and satires of the present day. Everyone gets made fun of - knights, priests, alchemists, lords, thieves, idiots, the whole shebang. The pace is quick, the dialogue is witty, the characters are sufficiently well-drawn and ridiculous, and it's one of the best plays of Elizabethan England not written by

Shakespeare.

James Violand says

Hilarious! Oh, if only we were able to better understand the spoken English of the early seventeenth century, this play would still draw the same crowds that it had in London! The rapier wit is unassailable. Jonson shows his brilliance as a playwright and as an expert in Ancient Greece and Rome, and does so in such an unassuming way, that all London adored him.

The fault with this play lies only in the manner of its presentation. This volume is terrible. It seems to have been published primarily to avoid costs of paper and ink. The pages are few, the font minuscule, the verses avoid familiarity but appear as run-on sentences. There is little, if any, stage direction to afford even the hint of order.

If you have no background in theater, if you lack an understanding of Shakespearian English, if you are ignorant of history, you will curse this play as too challenging.

There's the pity.

Jonfaith says

**A wench is a rare bait, with which a man
No sooner's taken, but he straight firk's mad.**

Funny that firk, it means many things: to both expel and to fuck as well as become or carry. I felt only the fervor of the former in my experience with brother Ben Jonson. Anthony Vacca has noted here on GR that Jonson was the Marty Amis of the Elizabethan underbelly. That might just be correct. It didn't help my flailing. Such wasn't pretty or becoming.

Lisa says

Surprise!

I didn't expect to be able to give *The Alchemist* a rating above one star, as I didn't know that there was an exquisite alternative version, a prequel so to say, written several centuries before the rubbish novel, in 1610, showing the reverse development of human intelligence and wit from then until the arrival of Coelho, when sheepish worship of empty words and stupid comparisons became popular. The omens however are provided (much to my disturbance) in the earlier text already, for in the initial dialogue of Benson's play I read:

"Oh, let the wild sheep loose!"

How did he know?

He is a wise man, that Ben Jonson, and addresses his audience as follows:

"Fortune, that favours fools, these two short hours

We wish away, both for your sake and ours,
Judging spectators; and desire in place
To the author justice, to ourselves but grace.
Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known
No country's mirth is better than our own."

Fortune that favours fools let the whole universe conspire to make this spectacularly funny play remain almost unread while one fool of our times wrote another Alchemist to let the wild sheep enthusiastically loose on it.

Jonson also prematurely explains some rather bizarre developments in the world in the doomsday-like year of 2016 with this simple acknowledgement of human character:

"I speak not this out of a hope to do good on any man against his will, for I know, if it were put to the question of theirs and mine, the worse would find more suffrages, because the most favour common errors!"

If this is not enough to make you want to read the real Alchemist, let me tell you that it is full of old-fashioned English indecencies. It actually made me blush to look up some of them in the dictionary. And, as icing on the cake, it contains an introductory argument in the form of an acrostic poem.

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Till it, and they, and all in fume are gone.

What happens before that, you will have to find out for yourselves, because I actually, unbelievably, truly, really, without sarcasm, sheepishly, somewhat surprisedly, recommend you to read : THE ALCHEMIST!

It is a good medicine against the other one!

David Sarkies says

Making fun of the common people

(5 January 2014)

The general gist of this play among commentators on Goodreads is that much of the humour is dated which is why they don't think the play works all that well. It is not so much that people seem to hate the play, but rather feel that the content belongs to the past. That, and the fact that Johnson is overshadowed by Shakespeare, though I would suggest that Johnson wrote in the generation after Shakespeare, meaning that

while he was a contemporary, it seems that his career is mostly post-Shakespeare, and Johnson probably wrote up to the time when the Puritans closed down all of the theatres in England. In any case it is always going to be difficult to write plays that last when you are up against a behemoth like Shakespeare, since Shakespeare was always going to attract most of the attention, and most of your work is going to be left to those who want to explore the literature that existed around his time (much like me). In a way it is sort of like competing with a reviewer like Manny on Goodreads, who has such a huge following that pretty much the rest of us pale in comparison.

What attracted me to this play though was that it seemed to deal with ordinary people. Okay, Shakespeare had ordinary people in his plays as well, such as the soldiers in Henry V and Falstaff and company in the two Henry IV plays. However, the main focus of his plays tended to be on the princes and kings (with maybe the exception of Henry IV where Prince Harry spends a lot of time mingling with the commoners). I remember one of the things that came out of history when I was in university was that there was the development of an interest in the lives of the commoners. In a way, history was moving away from being little more than dates and dead people, and beginning to be a sociological examination of the lives of people at the time. For instance I remember that in high school and university, the lecturer would give us a lecture on the common feudal village that existed at the time. However, with me, being young, impressionable, and into Dungeons and Dragons, when I did history all I wanted to learn about wars and heroes, not about how peasant kids would be beaten by their fathers in the paddock so that they would know where to grow their crops.

However, as I grew up I come to understand that there is more to history than simply heroes and wars, and that the voice and life of the common people are actually quite silent. This changes as more people became literate and the ability to write developed, however back in Shakespeare's time the little people, namely the illiterate ones, would simply remain hidden from our eyes, and when they appeared, they would appear as the laughing stock, the comic relief, and the foil in the plans of the hero. We see this in Henry IV and we see this here, where the actual lives of the commoners are hidden behind a farcical display of comedy and tomfoolery.

The other thing that I wish to raise with regards to this play is that question of making mockery of alchemy. The idea behind alchemy may be dated, but the idea of mocking it is not. Take for instance these guys:

Okay, this may not necessarily be what we have in the Alchemist (particularly since those guys are not a bunch of commoners that are trying to make money off of conning people into thinking that they can cure diseases and turn lead into gold) but it does show how playwrights and producers bring science, and even pseudo-science, into the world of comedy. In fact, much of what those guys (Sheldon et al) are studying could actually be considered pseudo-science since much of it is based upon mathematical assumptions and hypothesis, and in many cases these theories are little more than educated guesses. For instance, Einstein's theory of relativity is actually still just that, a theory (I was going to retract this statement based on a couple of comments below but, since I rarely actually delete comments, I decided to keep it, but also not because I think Einstein was wrong - he is far, far, far smarter than I will ever be, but more because sometime in the future somebody could possibly prove him wrong and a theory that supercedes his).

I was also fortunate enough to see a performance of this play when I was in London last year, and have finally gotten around to writing a blog post on it.

Anthony Vacca says

Ben Jonson is the Martin Amis of early 17th century English theater. His prose is bloated with dense analogies and shows of learnedness that jarringly contrast with a preoccupation for criminal lowlives and jokes about bodily secretions of both the sexy and non-sexy persuasions. Jonson also has a knack for ornamenting his rogue gallery of ne'er-do-wells with handles such as Doll Common, Subtle, Face, Dapper, Tribulation and Epicure Mammon. And, like Amis, unrelenting farce is pickled in picric satire. Not to be confused with Coelho's novel of New Age nonsense, Jonson's *The Alchemist* is a savage laugh at the exact same kind of self-help fraudulence that hacks (like the aforementioned Brazilian author) and crooks peddle to the greedy, ignorant masses in an unending cycle of disappointment and disaster. Groaners and moaners about the difficulty of Shakespearian verse may want to skulk off to parts elsewhere; even for an old hand at early Modern English, such as myself, I was very thankful for the copious footnotes that helped me puzzle my way through the punches of puns (huzzah for collective nouns!) that regurgitate out of esoteric references to alchemic processes. Effort on a good-natured reader's part does pay off—the juggling-on-a-tight-rope comedic plot takes an unexpected swerve (another Amis hallmark) in the last few lines of verse that makes this play a finger-in-your-eye to classical English theater conventions as well as damning statement about the integrity (read “lack thereof”) of our fellow children of God.

Sean says

The last goodreads-er to write up this play complained that it was identical to Volpone in action and cast, a criticism clearly based on an intelligent reading of neither work. The Alchemist had some of the same clever implications about sin and its relationship to self-deception that you would expect from a committed moralist like Jonson, but it was bold enough to take London as its setting (dangerous for satirical comedies of the age), and the ultimate justice of the action's culmination was far from thorough--complicating dramatic conventions and turning, instead, into a subtle indictment of the audience.

Jesse says

It is really very curious to see that this play is more famous, and more highly regarded, than Epicoene, for in the latter the humor never strays from joking upon aspects of vanity which have not changed much throughout time... but with The Alchemist, we see from the very title that the play is dated; and the play itself lives up to the title, for although the humor is indeed focused on the various customers and their gullibility, caused by their greed, the hocus-pocus means of bewildering these customers never ceases to harp on alchemical and pseudo-philosophical terms that strain the patience of even the most knowledgeable reader. Coleridge thought, to take a different tack, that the formal structure of this play was the greatest of all time, and there is much to be said in defense of this judgment - the way that Face deceives both Surly, who had just deceived Face as a Spanish don, and his comrades in crime, and in addition both his former customers, and his master, all within Act V, is so well consummated, though it be by means of a simple beard-shave, that the reader cannot help but smile with the profoundest admiration for Jonson's craft; and this craft is not marred too much by the alchemical terms, for they do to the spectator as they do to the avaricious customer, cause confusion of mind in order to increase emotional excitement (not unlike the effect of all continental philosophy!). Although a very fine play, The Alchemist should not be ranked above Epicoene.

Wendy says

Isn't it weird how Shakespeare is the only pre-1800s Western European playwright most of us read? In the *mumble mumble* years since high school, I've probably read or attended performances of roughly a dozen plays by the Bard. (Apparently it took 100 monkeys typing non-stop for 400 years or something to produce all those plays. I need to hire some of them to write for me, too.) What about all those other playwrights working around the same time--bunch of hacks, right? Not worth our time.

Poor Ben Jonson. I've now read his play *The Alchemist*, and the man can write. But I take issue when people say things "yeah, but he's no Shakespeare." Because what does that mean? The comedic timing, pacing, rising stakes, and witty dialogue are all top notch. So why is Ben Jonson "no Shakespeare?" Well, what does *The Alchemist* have--that Shakespeare plays do not? How about a contemporary, Elizabethan London setting, and a focus on low-class, conniving characters. Oh, and the scenes never move to anything more more poetical and romantic than poor Lovewit's temporary House of Vice. I can't help but imagine some ghostly Will chuckling to himself, saying "oh Ben, if only you had set more plays in Renaissance Italy, and excised the words "faeces" and "fart" from your scripts, then maybe 20th century teenagers would have had you foisted on them, too!" (but in more flowery language than that, obviously.)

Perhaps this sounds like I'm making fun of *The Alchemist*, but I'm not. It's tight, it moves quickly, and I laughed much more heartily than at any of Shakespeare's comedies (with the possible exception of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Will's comedies run together in my head). The colorful characters are ludicrous, devious, gullible and sweet in turn, the plot is twisty, the prose full of hilarious double entendre that you soon stop doubting whether "that whole scallop kissing thing meant what I think it did" because, yes Virginia, it did. Maybe it's difficult to follow at first, especially with the archaic turns of phrase, but it all feels true to its era. In fact, I can't help but wonder if there was some Victorian-era conspiracy to bury any old plays that they deemed not classy enough to be viewed by delicate 19th century ladies. So clutch your pearls tight and get thee a copy of this play. And let me know if there are any live performances in the works.

Vicky N. says

Ben Jonson is a great writer who's only mistake must be to have been born at the same time as the great Shakespeare. Full of satire and sexual innuendos, *The Alchemist* narrates the tale of two rogues, one the alchemist who promises people to turn all their items to gold and the other his helper. Matched with a prostitute who fools around with them it makes a comic tale of lust and greed.

Renée Paule says

After many years I've just re-read this lovely play. I'd forgotten most of the trickery and comedy. Loved it.

Ali says

Zeynep says

the second line of this play reads "i fart at thee" and somehow it only gets better from that.

Suzette Kunz says

This was an interesting play, mostly because Jonson is a contemporary of Shakespeare who has been pretty much overshadowed by him. He's no Shakespeare, but it was interesting. This is basically a farce about servants overtaking the house of a Lord who is away. They pretend to be alchemists, promising to turn metal into gold and all of these Londoners coming to them hoping to have all of their dreams come true.