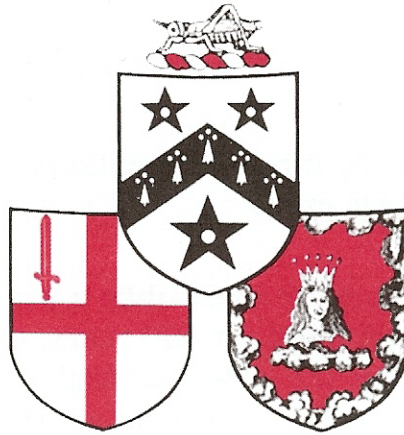


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BEN JONSON, *THE ALCHEMIST* and BLACKFRIARS

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Jonson, London and *The Alchemist* or Who is Lovewit? What is he?

I have two bodies of evidence to offer here. Neither admits a firm answer to the questions they raise, but I hope that one will prove rather more fruitful, even though it has to remain speculative, than the other. The first question is Ben Jonson's possible association with Gresham College in the early 1620s. The other is who Jonson had in mind when he composed the winner-takes-all character Lovewit for *The Alchemist* in 1610.

Jonson was born in Westminster in the late 1560s, a couple of years after Shakespeare was born in Stratford. Westminster was one of the two cities of London in 1600. As today, the richer suburbs were to the west, and the poorer to the north and east, although unlike today the inner city was wealthier than were the suburbs. Jonson was a citizen of Westminster, but also a paid-up member of one of the companies of the city of London, and therefore a freeman of London. One of the minor mysteries about his inner life is what that freedom of London meant to him.

Jonson's stepfather made him a member of the Tilers and Bricklayers, which made him technically a freeman of the city, capable of lawfully buying property and trading inside the walls. He continued to pay his dues as a member until 1612, and was derided as a bricklayer at times for the rest of his life. Much of his aggression must have come from his deprived childhood. He was proud of the people he killed; he became a Catholic when it was most dangerous and potentially disloyal to be one; he separated from his wife. From 1603 he climbed socially by living with his noble patrons. He cultivated a circle of learned friends among the nobles and gentry, including his former teacher at Westminster School, Camden, and the Cotton of the BL's famous ms collection.

Once his plays and poems made him well known, he turned to writing for a variety of noble patrons, a process that culminated in 1612-1616 in the publication of his "Works" including the plays as a large and costly folio-sized book. In 1616, with the Folio, he stopped writing plays and he may instead have started working for Gresham College. His *Discoveries*, not published in his own lifetime, were a distillation of his reading that probably went into his lectures. A short article which C. J. Sisson published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1951 picked up a testimony by Jonson of 20 October 1623 in a lawsuit about Walter Raleigh's estate, which described him as "Benjamin Johnson of Gresham College in London gent". The lawsuit was in effect the widow Lady Elizabeth Raleigh's attempt to get back some of her husband's plate and jewellery after his attainder and eventual execution in 1618. Jonson testified that he knew Raleigh's handwriting well, having exchanged many letters, and that he knew the

widow Raleigh very well too. But the point that Sisson dwelt on was the statement that he was of Gresham College.

Sisson proposed first that Jonson might have been occupying rooms there simply because he had lost everything in a recent fire, as his poem "An Execration upon Vulcan" testifies. But he preferred another possibility, that Jonson had become the Professor of Rhetoric at Gresham, or rather the deputy to the twenty-seven-year-old Henry Croke, the official holder of that post. This might mean that his famous *Discoveries*, his elaborate set of comments and quotations rhetoric and style, published in 1640, were his lecture-notes. The Rhetoric lectures at Gresham were delivered on Saturdays, at 8 am in Latin and at 2pm in English, and the phrases in *Discoveries* which sound like a lecturer commenting to his audience support Sisson's conclusion. If Jonson did become a lecturer in Rhetoric at Gresham that, adds Sisson, would explain why Oxford made him an honorary MA in 1619. He needed the degree in order to take up the post at Gresham's. It all makes quite a plausible story, both about Jonson, the most famously learned writer of his time, and about Gresham's College.

Unfortunately, for all the detailed support that Sisson brought in to back his theory, in 1968 Paul R. Sellin published a book about the Dutch scholar Daniel Heinsius, called *Daniel Heinsius and Stuart England*, in which he showed that much of Jonson's *Discoveries* was a direct translation of Heinsius's Latin, even down to the lecturer's phrases, and moreover that some of Jonson's insertions were of late Heinsius into earlier Heinsius. Most damagingly he showed that the use of the late Heinsius must put the date for Jonson to have made his notes not to 1619 or the early 1620s, before he claimed residence at Gresham's, but to some time after 1629. So the idea that the *Discoveries* were lecture notes for the Gresham Rhetoric lectures in 1623 falls down.

This need not, of course, entirely discredit the idea that Jonson may have been working for Gresham's in 1623 when he said he was living there. David Riggs, in his 1989 biography, is still prepared to acknowledge that Jonson "may have held the post of Deputy Professor of Rhetoric" at Gresham's. Basically the Heinsius evidence just disqualifies the *Discoveries* from being his notes for any early 1620s lectures.

But Jonson did have a connection with Gresham's College. We might even see the absence of any quips in his plays about the famous builder of London's Royal Exchange as a sign that Jonson had more respect for Gresham than he had for most of the rest of his contemporaries. The reference to "grave Gresham" in *Eastward Ho!*, a satire which he co-authored for the Blackfriars Boys with Chapman and Marston, may not be his own, but it does reflect his attitude to Gresham's work for London.

And it remains certain, as Riggs acknowledged, that Jonson did have some lectures on rhetoric in mind and on paper in the early 1620s, whether he was actually preparing them for Gresham's or not. His sadly comic poem "An Execration upon Vulcan", written after he lost his books and papers in a fire, curses Vulcan's hatred of learning. The God, he says, might have burned Don Quixote's library or other trifles.

But in my desk what was there to accite
So ravenous and vast an appetite?
I dare not say a body, but some parts
There were of search, and mastery in the arts.

(He was given an honorary MA by Oxford in 1619). The list that he gives of his work lost in the fire includes the account of his journey into Scotland, his life of Henry V, three books of his translation of Barclay's Latin *Argenis*, commissioned by King James in 1622, and what he calls "twice twelve years' stored-up humanity". He cites the burning of the Globe in 1613 and the Fortune in 1621 as evidence along with Vulcan's combustion of Jonson's own books. -- "See the world's ruins, nothing but the piles / Left! and wit since to cover it with tiles." The reeds of the original thatch at the Globe which caught fire first had now been replaced with tile roofing. And "Fortune, for being a whore, / 'Scaped not his justice any jot the more; / He burnt that idol of the revels too." The Fortune burned down in 1622. And London had lost a third theatrical venue, in Whitehall, where the Banqueting House, the theatre for court plays, burned in 1618. He goes on through a long list of famous burnings, a Pandora's box, the original case of trouble designed for Jove by that same culprit Vulcan.

Jonson's account of his losses includes a summary of his other work. It seems to have been a version of what later appeared as the "Discoveries", what he calls

All the old Venusine in poetry,
And lighted by the Stagyrite, could spy
Was there made English; with a Grammar too,
To teach some that their nurses could not do,
The purity of language.

The "Venusine" was Horace's *Ars Poetica*. The Stagyrite's illumination was Aristotle's *Poetics*. Jonson had read his commentary on Horace to Drummond of Hawthornden when he stayed with him in Scotland in 1619. Two versions of his translation were later published in 1640. On this evidence, by the time of the fire Jonson certainly had all the materials for giving a set of lectures on rhetoric at Gresham in 1619. The *Discoveries* post-date the fire, and cannot be his lecture notes for Gresham. But the possibility lies open that he did have an appointment at Gresham when he was living there in 1623. That is all the answer we can get to the first question.

Jonson was born in Westminster, London's second and more rapidly-growing city, and his whole life was based in London. Two of his plays celebrate specific local features of London's life in his time, and it is one of them, *The Alchemist*, that prompts the second question. The other was *Bartholomew Fair*, set in Smithfield on the feast-day and festival of Saint Bartholomew.

In the early years of the 17th century Jonson himself was living in the Blackfriars, which he made the setting for *The Alchemist*. He wrote a dedication to "the two famous universities" for the publication of his play *Volpone*, dated 11 February 1607, which he

addressed as “from my house in the Blackfriars”. The seventeenth line of *The Alchemist* locates its place “here in the Friars”, and the whole play is redolent of the London of 1609-10.

Both plays held the mirror up to nature, the stage reflecting, according to sound classical theory, as in a mirror, the life that his audiences knew at first hand. That hand is a bit remote from us now, so I propose to indicate just a few of the things that Jonson expected his first audiences to recognise of themselves in his play. It was quite a new thing to make London the setting for a play in 1610. The first plays set amongst contemporary London’s citizens had appeared little more than ten years before. Jonson’s own first play for Shakespeare’s company, *Every Man in his Humour*, was set in Italy when originally staged in 1598. He translated the setting to London in 1612, for the great Folio edition of his plays, by which time plays about London citizens and their wives had become the staple of the various repertories. Jonson was slow to join this fashion, still setting his *Volpone* of 1605 in Italy. So *The Alchemist* was his first play actually written for and about London.

It was written in 1610 for Shakespeare’s company, the King’s Men, to perform at their newly-acquired hall playhouse in the Blackfriars. Its location “Here in the Friars” is at the same time a house in the residential district of Blackfriars and the playhouse known as the Blackfriars. The Blackfriars district had been a “liberty” up to 1608, a precinct of the Benedictine Order up to the Reformation, and then a private precinct free from the city’s control, even though it was inside the city walls. In 1608 James, being very, very short of cash (the court’s wine bills alone were running at hundreds of thousands of pounds), finally allowed it to come under the city’s government in return for a huge loan. Not that the city gained much from it. As a residential district it was far too affluent to cause many riots. The main troubles came from the playhouse, and even then not at all from the riotous behaviour of the crowds but from their numbers, and especially from the nobility’s coaches that forced their way through the narrow lanes to deliver their wealthy passengers at the playhouse. The first notice of trouble from traffic jams ever to appear in the London records apart from the chronic squeezes on London Bridge itself was a result of the Blackfriars playhouse.

It was a wealthy neighbourhood, occupied by a distinct social mix. The preacher at its main church, Stephen Egerton, was famous for, among many other things, his stern disapproval of playgoing. There were some rigorous puritans living there, including some of the Anabaptists and dissenters who were beginning to form themselves in Amsterdam to sail to the Americas and found a new society there. It had many of the richest noblemen in town, besides the lesser citizens and vendors of things like feathers -- all gallants and ladies who wanted feathers to decorate themselves went to Blackfriars for them -- and the higher-class products sold there were drugs rather than drapery, wine rather than beer. Abel Drugger with his beginnings of a tobacco shop would have been typical of the Blackfriars traders catering to the richer residents of Blackfriars. Artisan jobs and the handicraft shops, shoemakers, cobblers and industrial goods, worked in other parts of the city, in Cheapside if they were grocers and food merchants, near St. Paul’s if they were booksellers, further north or east if they were mercers.

The Blackfriars theatre was in the cultural rather than the commercial heart of London. But although London was growing very fast, approaching a quarter of a million people by the turn of the century, and at four hundred thousand ready to become the biggest city in Europe by 1650, it was still a tightly-knit community. *The Alchemist* is packed with references to places in the city that everyone knew, and to recent events that everyone knew about. They include Simon Read, convicted in Southwark in 1608 for raising spirits, conjuring devils to locate some stolen money for a young clerk rather like Dapper in the play; Gamaliel Ratsey, a famous highwayman executed in 1605; and the notorious Mediterranean pirate, an Englishman called Ward. Ward was the subject of a play *The Christian turned Turk*, which was staged in 1609 while Jonson was writing *The Alchemist*. John Dee, one of the real alchemists, who worked for Queen Elizabeth and got great fame for his learning, had died in 1608. They all get mentions in the play.

Such things were all current gossip. There is a mention of the New Exchange, opened in 1609, and a reference to the New River scheme, a water-works project for London started by the then Lord Mayor, Edward Myddleton, work on which began in 1609. Other places mentioned include of course St. Paul's, which was the centre of town and the meeting-place for all gossips; pie-corner, a place selling pork products near Smithfield market; the artillery yard, a field just outside the walls near Bishopsgate where the gunners from the Tower of London practised; Lothbury, a street of copper-founders and brass-makers; Sea-coal Lane, near Fleet Street; the Wool-sack Inn in Farringdon, the Dragon Inn, and the Pigeon up-river at Brentford; and of course the escape itself to Brentford, a famous rendezvous for lovers and fugitives outside London, then seven miles up the Thames to the west of the city. Similarly Ratcliff, Pimlico, the madhouse at Bedlam, and Pickt-hatch, a well-known loitering-place for prostitutes near the Charterhouse (the play is full of current London euphemisms for prostitutes -- bona robas, cockatrices, guinea birds, punk device).

The characters in the play of course mirrored the Blackfriars locals, though it was not exactly holding the mirror up to nature in the actual audience for the first performances. The two puritans, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome, would not have been playgoers, though they were visible enough in the streets outside. They are Amsterdam Brethren, from the company of anti-episcopal preachers excluded from the established church for the Calvinist rigour of their views -- in the play they use the name "Christ-time", for instance, instead of Christmas, because the suffix "mass" sounded too Catholic. They refer to their exiled colleagues as the "silenced saints", and the "exiled saints", because the Church of England refused to allow them to preach -- hence their base in Amsterdam, and the longer-term plan to sail for the Americas.

Abel Drugger and his ambition to be a tobacconist, and the slightly more upmarket Dapper, were traders who catered for the rich residents like Sir Epicure Mammon. The play is full of references to citizens and citizen ambitions, such as the Company of the Grocers, one of the twelve livery companies, and the naughty suggestion that Drugger might one day be called to the scarlet, meaning that he would become a Sheriff, in scarlet gown, on the Dick Whittington model. The Whittington story, where the bells

call him back to become thrice Lord Mayor of London, had become hugely popular in the 1590s, especially among the apprentices who made up the largest proportion of the audiences at plays in these years, though not at the exclusive Blackfriars, where the price of the cheapest admission was six times what it was at the Globe.

The largest of the other communities contributing to the early audiences for Shakespeare's company were the Inns of Court. Located within easy walking distance of the Blackfriars, the two Temples, Lincoln's Inn, and the three lesser inns had at least eight hundred students or ostensible students of law who flocked to the plays, and especially to the one expensive indoor playhouse in the Blackfriars. In this mirror they are not represented on the stage side, but there are ample references to the terms and vacations which determined their comings and goings. I suspect Jonson relied on the student component in the Blackfriars audience to pick up his more exotic uses of alchemical jargon, and to enjoy his explosions of comic excess in Doll's outpouring of Broughton.

Two other things in the play were characteristic of London in 1610. One was the plague, which has made Lovewit, the owner of the house, flee into the country, as everyone who could afford to did when the number of deaths reached epidemic proportions, as it did in many summers. There had been a particularly intense run of plague from early in 1608 right through 1609. There was no playing permitted from July 1608 or earlier right until January 1610. The deaths of 2,262 people were recorded in the 121 parishes of London for 1608, and 4,240 for 1609. For many years the Privy Council had required each of the London parishes to keep a separate record of plague deaths from those that were due to other causes, and every Thursday it added up the 121 totals. When the number of deaths from plague in any week for all 121 parishes rose to thirty it ordered the closure of all public meetings, including the playhouses; it postponed the new law terms, which would normally have brought many outsiders with lawsuits into London; and it tried to restrict travel generally -- except for those who had country homes, of course. In 1610, when Jonson was writing *The Alchemist*, the plague epidemic was an all-too recent event. Lovewit's absence, leaving his butler Jeremy to mind the house, was a familiar practice in the Blackfriars.

The other characteristically London thing was the easy access the trickster characters in the play have to Spanish costumes. The play opens with the quarrel between the three rogues, and a few verbal parodies of the most famous of the old plays, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, first staged twenty-three years before. Face, when he goes to get a second Spanish costume to match Surly's, actually says that he will go to the players and get "Hieronimo's old cloak, ruff, and hat", the costume of the leading character in Kyd's play. This may just seem like a theatrical in-joke, but this identification of the alchemists as close friends of the play-actors has an important function in the play's conclusion, which I'll come to later.

The Shakespearean drama, culturally still something new in the London of 1610, was particularly prone to what Jonson called, in the prefatory epistle to *Volpone* in 1607, the "trade" of application. Every fictional story put on the stage was thought liable to be

fitted to the actual events of the day, at least so far as censorship allowed, whether it was the Essex rebellion or King James's foreign policy in *A Game at Chess*. The law said strictly that no living person could be represented on stage. The players of course flouted that law -- for *A Game at Chess* they actually got hold of a suit of the Spanish Ambassador's own clothing, and his notorious sedan chair, which had a special commode seat to accommodate the painful fistula that he suffered from. The art or game or trade of "application" was a major pleasure of the playgoing game for Londoners. Jonson was cautious about making things too hot for himself with the censor, and chose to characterise familiar types rather than specific individuals. But the "application" was usually pretty obvious. In a play like *The Alchemist* he could rely on the audience recognising all the types while not actually identifying themselves personally in the reflections they saw on the stage.

In the prologue to the play Jonson announces what he is doing. "Our scene is London", he proclaims, "'cause we would make known, / No country's mirth is better than our own." More to the point, he defends what the play does:

Though this pen
Did never aim to grieve, but better men,
Howe'er the age he lives in doth endure
The vices that she breeds, above their cure.

Instead, his aim is better than that of the age.

But when the wholesome remedies are sweet,
And, in their working, gain and profit meet,

-- everyone knows that all writers since Aristotle have claimed profit and delight as the reward of drama --

He hopes to find no spirit so much diseased,
But will with such fair correctives be pleased
For here he doth not fear who can apply.

-- And just in case there are any devotees of the "trade" of application present -

If there be any that will sit so nigh
Unto the stream, to look what it doth run,
They shall find things, they'd think, or wish, were done;
They are such natural follies, but so shown,
As even the doers may see, and yet not own.

In other words, you might apply these doings to yourself, but you can conceal your own folly by refusing to acknowledge that it's you in the mirror.

The Alchemist was designed to show the spectators a set of characters who were deliberate parodies of their neighbours and themselves, shown of course as types, not as recognisable individuals. The cast is a mix of gulls or fools, and of rogues or tricksters, with one exception. The gulls, who range in social status from Sir Epicure Mammon and his gentleman friend Surly through young Kestrel, the land-owning would-be hawk and his sister the young widow Dame Pliant, to the Puritans, and to Dapper and Drugger, are a deliberate conspectus of the kind of society reflected in the audience at the Blackfriars in 1610. Their common factor is their greed and their gullibility, their capacity to be deceived by the tricksters, Face the many-costumed disguiser, Subtle the fake alchemist and spouter of inflated alchemical jargon, and Doll, a mixture of both.

In *Volpone*, the last play Jonson wrote for the King's Men before *The Alchemist*, every character is punished with 'poetic' justice exactly according to his or her deserts. Volpone, who tricked his gulls by pretending to be ill and on the point of death, is condemned to work in a hospital until he is sick indeed. The old man Corbaccio, whose greed made him try to disinherit his son, is required to relinquish his whole estate to him, and so on. All the punishments fit the crimes. But *The Alchemist* ends differently. All the gulls are certainly exposed as fools, and their greed makes them suffer as they lose their investments in the alchemical project, some without ever knowing they have been gulled. That is a consistent punishment for the way greed makes fools gullible. But the rogues are not punished in any judicial way. They all revert to precisely their previous status. Subtle, the fake alchemist, and his Doll escape penniless back to the streets they came from, with no profit from their elaborate con, the fake alchemical projection which goes up in smoke (offstage) in Act 4, and which blows up on them in truth when they start conning each other in Act 5. They are restored to precisely the social outcast state they were in before the play started. So is Face, who returns to his former role as the owner's butler.

But in Act 5, things end differently. Once the house's owner, Lovewit, returns unexpectedly at the end of Act 4, and manages finally to make his way into the house, he becomes a complicating factor in the resolution. Face tricks Subtle and Doll and send them away penniless, and with Lovewit's backing he fools all the gulls and sends them away. He himself returns to his former role as Jeremy, Lovewit's butler. But somebody has to profit from all the loot that the gulls have brought to the house.

The only one who does profit from all the games and falsifications is Lovewit. Starting late in the gulling game, he takes all the gulls' money, and gets the girl too. He has no real claim at all to these winnings, even in his effrontery -- he is led by Face, who turns himself into his ally in Act 5 against his former partners because of the way the plot has twisted against him thanks to Lovewit's unexpected return home. Lovewit himself shows nothing in the things he does through the last Act of the play to justify his winner-takes-all victory.

In *Volpone* all the punishments fit the crimes with macabre precision. In *The Alchemist* the punishments are of three kinds. The gulls are exposed as fools for their gullibility. The rogues are returned to where they were before the play started. Lovewit the

latecomer is the only one who wins, and he gets away with everything, all the loot from all the gulls, plus the nubile Dame Pliant, won against the sceptical and least gullible of all the gulls, Surly. This oddity ought to make us ask why Jonson, the arch-maker of ingenious plots and devotee of neat closures, should have laid out such a manifestly discordant ending to his most London-centred play, and given all the profit to this passive latecomer Lovewit.

The explanation I can offer for this is rather contorted, but it fits the evidence of the text surprisingly well. Basically I would argue that the whole play is a mirror of playing, a metadrama. The gulls are the audience, and the rogues are not just trickster-outsiders but the stage-players who con their audiences. Playing as a deception, a 'counterfeit', was a commonplace about the theatre. The Blackfriars audience is gulled by the tricksters whose 'application' is their identity as players, staging their deceptive show of alchemical magic and verbal mumbo-jumbo. The "Argument" attached to the printed version of the play, a typical Jonsonian verse which spells out the play's title as an acrostic, uses the language of playing companies to describe what the rogues do. Noting Face as the servant to the Blackfriars house, and Subtle and Doll as the tricksters, we are told

only wanting some
House to set up, with him they here contract,
Each for a share, and all begin to act.
Much company they draw, and much abuse.

As sharers in the playing company, they are the people who drew up a contract for the use of the house they were to play in, they draw in a large audience, and they abuse them. Bear that summary of the action as theatre, as a metaphor for the staging process, in mind. It tells us directly what Jonson is up to.

It is a play about a play about trickery, set in the Blackfriars precinct as that neighbourhood is mirrored inside the Blackfriars theatre. The audience has been gulled out of its cash by the players, just as the gulls on stage are conned of their money by the tricksters who deceive them. That creates a neat distinction between actors and audience, and registers itself as an all-too apt "application", since the players have taken the audience's money by performing exactly the sort of con-trick with verbiage and gulling that Face and Subtle and Doll perform on the Blackfriars stage to the Blackfriars gulls. But that leaves Lovewit out of the equation. What, as the house-owner and profiteer, can his role be in relation to the company of players?

Can we "apply" the character of Lovewit to anyone in the real Blackfriars? He can act a part when Face calls on him to do so; and he has an intriguing mix of the master-servant relationship with Face. Note how it is he who starts the concluding speech to the play, and then hands it over to Face, his now-restored Jeremy the butler. The butler, who is also, as the audience have seen, the supreme actor of roles, who started the play as a profit-making thief calling himself Face, and ended back playing his butler role once

again, sharing his profits with his boss. He is the player as a con-man, who teaches some of his play-acting to his master in the interests of their mutual profit.

Lovewit tells the audience, in the rhyming verses that signalled the play's end, and in his character as beneficiary of all the loot thanks to Face, of his gratitude to this player-con-man.

That master
That had received such happiness by a servant,
In such a widow, and with so much wealth,
Were very ungrateful, if he would not be
A little indulgent to that servant's wit,
And help his fortune, though with some small strain
Of his own candour. Therefore, gentlemen,
And kind spectators, if I have outstripped
An old man's gravity, or strict canon, think
What a young wife and a good brain may do:
Stretch age's truth sometimes, and crack it too.

Then he hands the epilogue over to Jeremy/Face, who says

Gentlemen,
My part a little fell in this last scene,
Yet 'twas decorum. And though I am clean
Got off from Subtle, Surly, Mammon, Doll,
Hot Ananias, Dapper, Drugger, all
With whom I traded; yet I put myself
On you, that are my country; and this pelf
Which I have got, if you do quit me, rests,
To feast you often, and invite new guests.

Decorum? He claims that although his "part" in the finale didn't involve such disguises and play-acting as in the previous Acts he has got money, thanks to his master's generosity, and he claims that he will use his profit, "this pelf which I have got", to present more plays in the future, "To feast you often, and invite new guests", namely another load of Blackfriars gulls.

So where does Lovewit the master and owner of the house stand in relation to his servant-player Jeremy/Face? He is not only the owner of the house in which the con-trick was played, but the chief and only profiteer from the con-trick. The owner of the Blackfriars "house" is a lover of wit, who has been absent from the house because of the plague. But who were the lovers of wit who owned the Blackfriars playhouse in 1610? The answer to that fits the metadramatic structure of the plot with considerable precision. In 1608 after ten years of use by a boy company, the Blackfriars had reverted to the possession of its owners, Richard and Cuthbert Burbage. They, having run the Globe through the same years, from 1599 to 1608, as members of a consortium of five

of the sharers from the playing company that performed at the Globe, set up a new deal in 1608. They extended the ownership of the Blackfriars to the same consortium. When the Blackfriars playhouse re-opened in early 1610, after the long closure because of the plague, while Jonson was still writing his play, the owners of the Blackfriars had become those five Lovewits Richard and Cuthbert Burbage, John Heminges, Henry Condell, and last but not far from least that most famous lover of wit Will Shakespeare.

Like so many of Jonson's plays, *The Alchemist* is a testimony to the capitalistic practices of its time. Even in the world of the London theatre, the chief profits went to the landlords. You might say that Lovewit bought Jonson's play, and made money from it at the expense of the Blackfriars residents of London. The Lovewits of the Blackfriars enjoyed their plays, and they enjoyed the profit they made from the players who enacted the con-tricks which the plays enacted on their gullible audiences.

Shakespeare as Lovewit did not take offence at this identification of him as the chief profiteer. He made fun of Jonson in *The Winter's Tale*, probably written a bit earlier than *The Alchemist*, in his reference to the statue by Guilio Romano and Hermione's 'natural posture', a reference to Jonson's own notorious copy, cited by Epicure Mammon, of *Aretino's Postures*, and in giving Bohemia a sea-coast, a display of apparent ignorance that the literal-minded Jonson derided to Drummond of Hawthornden some years later. More to the point, in Shakespeare's own alchemical play, *The Tempest*, written as Jonson was finishing his magician play, he mocked Jonson's well-advertised and Greshamist devotion to the neo-classical unities by locating his play on a single island, and timing its action to fit precisely the three hours traffic of the stage time, from two o'clock till five o'clock, a feat which outdid Jonson's own devotion to the hours of daylight that he took care to signal so strongly in *The Alchemist*.

If we confine ourselves to reading these play-texts as pure 'literature', we lose a lot of their riches. My answer to the second question, who was Lovewit, has no answer more positive than can be found to the question whether Jonson lectured on rhetoric at the original Gresham College. Speculation about answers to that question is unavailing. But speculation about the other question, I would argue, enhances everything we can get from Jonson's games of mirroring and 'application'.

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