BEN JONSON

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THE PRACTICE OF DECEIT IN BEN JONSON'S *VOLPONE* AND *THE ALCHEMIST*

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By

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ABSTRACT

A discussion of Ben Jonson's practice of deceit in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. Analysis is informed by Jonson's statements against lying and his theory of language as it is outlined in *Discoveries*. His views on language are seen to diverge from his dramatic practice of the gulling comedy in that in theory he upholds the value of fixed and stable meaning. Yet in his comedy, deceptive practices demonstrate the flexibility of meaning made possible by the gap between signifier and signified. The theory of the sign as developed by both Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Saunders Peirce informs this discussion. Attention is also paid in the final chapter to the relationship between fiction (lying) and pleasure.

INTRODUCTION

For this examination of Ben Jonson's practice of deceit, I have selected only his two most famous gulling comedies, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, for discussion. I have done so because they seem to me to embody most explicitly Jonson's rather self-conscious attempts to address the problematic nature of interpretation - of discerning the truth from the lie - when language and rhetoric can be manipulated to serve either end. In the first chapter I outline the features of Jonson's theory of language, most relevant to this discussion, using *Discoveries* as a partial framework for my analysis; also from *Discoveries*, I draw upon Jonson's statements concerning lying itself. It seems clear to me that there is a gap or inconsistency between Jonson's theory of language and his dramatic practice, especially in the gulling comedies. His ideals for language and poetic endeavour involved the attempt to fix meaning, to use language "judiciously" so that meaning is clear and stable. Yet, the gulling of dupes in his comedy relies, although not entirely, upon the flexibility of meaning which is a consequence of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign as it was defined by Ferdinand de Saussure. Jonson's practice of deceit as it relies on linguistic practices will be the focus of my second chapter. Specifically, I will examine Jonson's use of language and rhetoric and his creation of specific discourses in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*

that have the deception of the gulls as their aim. Further, I will use Charles Saunders Peirce's theory of the sign to understand another issue important to Jonson, that of the impairment of critical abilities. In chapter three I move on to a rather large topic, especially perhaps for the Renaissance, and that is the relationship of fiction to pleasure. There has been no attempt to place this aspect of my discussion within its historical context as my endeavour here has been primarily to understand Jonson's dramatic practice of deceit in terms of semiotic theory - the gap between signifier and signified. How deceit is facilitated through linguistic practices is the focus of my discussion.

CHAPTER ONE

From the perspective of both a creative writer and literary critic, Ben Jonson articulated a theory of literature and language, and throughout his writing he expressed his ideas on the forms, language and style appropriate to poetry and drama, and on the social role of the poet. Almost at his own insistence, Jonson is universally considered a didact and moralist, bent on both chastising and teaching wayward humanity about human folly and vice. In doing so, he also wished to elevate the poet's status in a society where poetry was often met with either ambivalence or hostility, rarely taken seriously as a force in the affairs of human society unless the poet is so hapless as to offend the significant institutions, the church or state. Because of his work as a satirist, much of Jonsonian criticism focuses on the moral, corrective aspects of Jonson's work. In this discussion, however, I would like to narrow the perspective somewhat and begin with a specific aspect of Jonson's theory of language and its relationship to the practice of deceit in the two gulling comedies, *Volpone* and The *Alchemist*. As a writer, he had particular expectations of language: for one thing, it should embody realist principles, representing authentic human character and society. His much quoted preference for "deeds, and language, such as men do use" (from the prologue to EMI, 21) has been used to emphasize his commitment to

realism in drama, and this commitment is connected to his broader artistic goal that linguistic expression be used to embody the truth of representation: it should promote authenticity. "Language such as men do use" would achieve an authentic representation of human speech for the theatre. For Jonson, language should be transparent, providing a window on reality where, in semiotic terms, signifiers are united with their signifieds. An individual's speech, for example, would represent and be in some manner identical to the mind or consciousness of that person:

> Language most shows a man: speak that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the image of the parent of it, the mind. No glass renders a man's form, or likeness, so true as his speech. Nay it is likened to a man: and as we consider feature, and composition in a man; so words in language: in the greatness, aptness, sound, structure, and harmony of it." (*Discoveries* 2515-2523)

Here, Jonson expresses his view that language is a reliable means of representation - it is a "mirror" that provides an accurate reflection of truth. In effect, he is also stating that there are at least two signifieds in this case. When he unites speech and speaker in this way, Jonson is expressing his belief in a principle of identity where the referents of language are not only the ideas expressed, but refer back to the speaker, signifying the speaker's "mind", the "parent" of speech. In terms of Jonson's dramatic practice, such a view of language informed his representation of characters on the stage as he endeavoured

to create a match between a character's personality, "humour", occupation or social position and the language ascribed to him or her. This is, in part, an aspect of Jonson's preference for realism in drama. Words "are to be chose according to the persons we make speak, or the things we speak of." (*Discoveries* 2342-2344) But it is also connected to Jonson's conviction that language intrinsically could embody meaning or truth, that it was a means through which reality could be represented accurately. The skilled writer strives to achieve such an intrinsic relationship between words and things; in the terminology of semiotics, a match should exist between the signifier and its signified that is somehow 'natural' or organic. In another analogy, Jonson again associates language with the human body, and asserts that "In all speech, words and sense are as the body, and the soul. The sense is as the life and soul of language, without which all words are dead." (*Discoveries*, 2334-6) James Redwine in his introduction to *Ben Jonson's Literary Criticism*, emphasizes the importance of this soul-body relation to Jonson's literary theory.

> ...style is not an ornamental garment for the body of thought; it is the incarnation of thought, the body of which thought is the vital form and life-giving soul...It is the ultimate soul-body relation between sense and language which makes it mandatory that a writer exercise all styles as propriety, verisimilitude, or decorum demands. (xviii-xix)

But this mimetic function of language, creating the "likeness of truth", could only be achieved through the

judicious, discerning use of language. Jonson states in *Discoveries* that "Words are the people's; yet there is a choice of them to be made." (2339-2341) This same idea is expressed in Jonson's distinction between the skilled poet and the hack writer, the true and the false "artificer", where he outlines his conception of the poet's proper use of language. The writer's task involves finding the correct, most suitable linguistic expression for the idea at hand. Of the true writer or "artificer" he says:

> Then in his elocution to behold, what work is proper: which hath ornament: which height: what is beautifully translated: where figures are fit: which gentle, which strong to show the composition manly. And how he hath avoided faint, obscure, obscene, sordid, humble, improper, or effeminate phrase; which is not only praised of the most, but commended (which is worse) especially for that it is naught." (*Discoveries* 982-991)

Jonson consistently reaffirms the necessity of correct and appropriate language, arguing repeatedly that a writer's vocation involves diligent study and the judicious use of language in order to fulfill the main principle of mimesis, to create an accurate likeness of truth. Implicit in this approach to language is his belief and determination that an intrinsic match between signifier and signified is possible. Jonson's desire that the parts of the sign be united is, I think, clear and is evident by his attention to ideas such as the judicious use of language which emphasizes the careful selection of each word, phrase or metaphor, each idea given its appropriate linguistic expression.

Also in *Discoveries*, Jonson distinguishes between various types of wits, expressing scorn for those wits who "labour only to ostentation", concentrating more on the "surface of a work, than in the matter, and foundation: for that is hid, the other is seen." (857-861) "Matter" must form the foundation of a work for it to be successful. The writer whose ability extends only to the superficial aspects of a work is an inferior one. Jonson expresses this idea rather succinctly in his description of a particularly odious type of wit:

> But the wretcheder are the obstinate contemners of all helps and arts: such as presuming on their own naturals (which perhaps are excellent) dare deride all diligence, and *seem to mock at the terms, when they understand not the things*; thinking that way to get off wittily, with their ignorance. (*Discoveries* 922-928, my emphasis)

Here Jonson has identified the two parts of the sign as defined by Saussure, the signifier and the signified. A writer may employ a clever use of signifiers - the "terms" - and remain fundamentally ignorant of what they signify - "the things" - the concepts to which they refer and are meant to express. For Jonson, such a display is inexcusable and its practice is deceitful for it is a misrepresentation of knowledge. True wit is that which has learning as its foundation and demonstrates a genuine grasp of knowledge; it is not represented by displays of mere linguistic craft. To "mock at the terms" is a misuse of language from Jonson's point of view and a delusory form of wit, lacking the

"matter" which can come only from true learning. Jonson's ideas on "matter" are similar to those articulated through the soul-body metaphor - matter, or knowledge ought to be present within language itself, words and sense fulfilling a principle of unity and identity.

But, in fact, the relationship language has to sense is not as intimate or organic as Jonson's soul-body analogy suggests. According to Saussure's theory of the sign, there can never be a match between the two parts of the sign: "the linguistic sign is arbitrary." (Saussure 67) Meaning is produced only through the differences between signs, and the gap which exists between signifier and signified is a condition of language itself. Douglas Atkins in his article "The Sign as a Structure of Difference: Derridean Deconstruction and Some of Its Implications", considers this to be Saussure's most important argument and emphasizes the significance of the arbitrary linguistic sign.

> Because the sign, phonic as well as graphic, is a structure of difference, signs being made possible through the differences between sounds, that which is signified by the signifier is never present in and of itself. Word and thing, word and thought, sign and meaning can never become one. (134)

The fact that meaning is not present in language was both a problem for Jonson and an essential part of his dramatic practice of the dupe-plot. Despite his efforts to use language "judiciously", struggling to ensure that his language and style were actually connected to reality or truth and conveyed a precise meaning, he was continually

frustrated by misinterpretations of his work. Yet without the arbitrary nature of the sign and the resulting possibilities for misinterpretation, deceit could not take place. The reader, therefore, is confronted by an interesting irony in Jonson's practice of deceit in the comedies which use a dupe-plot structure: Jonson exploits the deceptive potential of the sign embodied in the gaps between signifier and signified as a primary means of deception. In his literary theory he attempts to circumvent the arbitrary nature of the sign, but in his dramatic practice he exploits the very property of sign systems, especially language, which he rails against.

This irony has interesting repercussions for an important issue in Jonson's career as a writer. Jonson wanted his work to be evaluated and appreciated according to the criteria he established for the "true artificer" and he laboured to control interpretations of his work and himself. Frequently he expressed anger and frustration at the persistent misinterpretation of his writing, by both his audience who often did not appreciate the quality of Jonson's work, and by those agents of the government who searched for seditious material in the writings of the dramatists of the day. Given Jonson's own convictions regarding the truly skilled poet, who exercises judgement and discernment in the use of language and structure, he was determined to be understood, and it was a source of continuing irritation that his meaning was either missed or

misconstrued. He considered such obtuseness to be a result of ignorance on the part of his audience whose critical capacity must clearly be defective. Such was the case with *Catiline*; it was soundly rejected by audiences, who found it boring when it was performed. When Jonson retaliated by bringing out a quarto edition of the play he dedicated it to his patron the Earl of Pembroke "with a volley of insults directed at the ignorance of the age and an outburst about the impossibility of discrimination in 'these jig-given times'." (Miles 143) He did not attribute his audience's failure to understand and correctly interpret the subtleties of *Catiline*, at least consciously, to any inherent properties of the process of signification itself, and did not explicitly acknowledge that meaning could never be fixed within language. Yet the instability of meaning is implicit in the practice of deceit in the gulling comedies.

Jonson's interest in deceit is shared by Jonathan Swift, perhaps because they are both satirists. Swift's creation, Gulliver, is impressed by the Houyhnhnms ignorance of the practice of lying. Gulliver's Houyhnhnm master has difficulty comprehending such notions as "*doubting* or *not believing*", "*lying* and *false representation*", and when Gulliver attempts to teach his master about falsehood, he is met with this argument:

> For he argued thus; that the use of speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive information of facts; now if any one *said the thing which was not*, these ends were defeated; because I cannot properly be said to

> understand him, and I am so far from receiving information, that he leaves me worse than in ignorance, for I am led to believe a thing black when it is white, and short when it is long. And these were all the notions he had concerning that faculty of lying, so perfectly well understood, and so universally practised among human creatures. (193-4)

The Houyhnhnm's clear yet naive reasoning wittily satirizes the ubiquitous human practice of lying by setting it against the ostensible aims of communication. He dismisses "false representation" as somewhat absurd because it subverts the ends of language as he perceives them - to communicate accurate information so as to promote knowledge and dispel ignorance. However, the Houyhnhnm's observations help to identify lying's relationship to the process of signification itself - it does not lie outside the signifying process, but is a feature of it. During any "false representation", communication is still taking place, but it is of a different nature and has different aims from those the Houyhnhnm attributes to language. That Swift recognized the possibility that language, as a system of signs that represent or stand in for things - its referents - cannot guarantee truth, is demonstrated in the voyage to Laputa where the Laputians entertained the possibility of getting rid of language altogether. In the interests of shortening discourse, it is suggested that "since words are only names for *things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such *things* as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on."

(150) Although the point is not made explicit, it is obvious that in such a system where things themselves are used to communicate, the creation of an effective lie would be far more problematic.

Swift's attitude towards falsehood is scornful and knowing. The "faculty of lying" is considered a feature of human existence itself. Jonson, if we can take the position he takes against lying in *Discoveries* seriously, reserves special invective for those who lie. The following is one of his most explicit denunciations of falsehood:

> Truth is man's proper good; and the only immortal thing, was given to our mortality to use...For without truth all the actions of mankind, are craft, malice, or what you will, rather than wisdom. Homer says, he hates him worse than hell-mouth, that utters one thing with his tongue, and keeps another in his breast. Which high expression was grounded on divine reason. For a lying mouth is a stinking pit, and murders with the contagion it venteth. Beside, nothing is lasting that is feigned; it will have another face than it had, ere long: as Euripides saith, 'No lie ever grows old.' (659-673)

Lying is associated primarily with language because language is the primary tool of the liar, hence the metaphor of the "stinking pit" to express outrage against the "lying mouth". Considering that language is the tool of a writer, and that Jonson had convictions regarding effective and appropriate linguistic usage, it is perhaps understandable that an exploration of deceit would find its way into his dramatic practice.

In her article "'Sportful Malice': Duping in the Comedies of Jonson and Shakespeare", Ann Blake discusses the place of deception and the dupe-plot structure in English comedy, agreeing with Leo Salingar that, along with romance, two kinds of deception, "accidental and contrived, the workings of Fortune or man's trickery", form the substance of comedy. (121) The dupe-plot catered to the Elizabethan taste for practical jokes and displays of wit rather ironic; its object was to expose fools, imposters and other deserving individuals to ridicule to the delight and laughter of the audience. As Blake points out, following *Every Man in His Humour*, Jonson abandoned even cursory attention to a romantic intrigue and instead

> put at the centre the exploitation of fools by rogues, and the practices of young men, out to mock fools for their own amusement. Duping is no longer a second string in an intrigue with another specific aim; and now Jonson characteristically shapes his plots to comment sharply on the dupe's character. (124).

Volpone and *The Alchemist* are structured entirely around the practice of deceit by a confederacy of rogues who are masters of control and manipulation, not merely for the amusement of themselves and the audience as Blake suggests, but for material gain and profit. Jonson acknowledged explicitly that the motives behind deceitful practices were for one party to gain an advantage over another, in any communication exchange, for material profit. Jonson was able to use the dupe-plot structure as a means of commenting

on human nature, condemning vice, especially greed and ignorance. But gulling comedies, with the practice of deceit as their focus and *raison d'etre*, also allowed Jonson to explore many issues dealing with various signifying practices, including language and rhetoric, which gave expression to his interest in the processes of signification and communication. The gulling comedy provided Jonson with specific opportunities to focus on the problems of interpretation and discernment - the ability to discern the truth from the lie is a critical skill involving astute judgement and as such, was of keen interest to Jonson. The dupe-plot structure allowed him to create a tightly controlled and energetic plot as well as interesting and witty characters that could manipulate the means of signification to dupe and ridicule the avaricious and ignorant, much to the delight of his audience.

CHAPTER TWO

The art of feigning, or the creation of the successful lie, which is judged so by its ability to pass undetected as truth, involves more than a knowledge of the deceptive potential inherent in language itself, but Jonson does pay particular attention to the art of rhetoric in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. Although Jonson's comedies demonstrate that there are many ways to lie and cheat, the skillful use of rhetoric is singled out as one of the most effective. He creates a number of discourses which all have as their aim the passing of deception for truth. All are unique and distinctive discourses, but conform to one of Jonson's rules regarding language: in the interests of representation (a convincing and artful imitation of nature) each discourse must conform to the profession of the speaker. As a theorist of linguistic style, he created discourses that are significant for their individual rhetorical strategies, tailor-made to serve particular interests, but all of which are intended to persuade fools and unsuspecting dupes of their veracity. *Volpone* contains two such discourses, the mountebank's sales pitch and the lawyer's rhetoric of Voltore. Each discourse portrays language as a signifying process which can be manipulated by persons who not only use language cleverly and with verbal ingenuity, but also know the art of story-telling, including attention to structure

and the development of a narrative that is rhetorically effective.

When discussing the reputation of poetry in Renaissance England, Sidney in his *Defence of Poetry* observes that poets "are almost in as good reputation, as the mountebanks at Venice." (62) Although the mountebank is a figure associated with fraud and imposture, the association of poetry with mountebankery is surprisingly relevant as the mountebank is also a type of artist. The mountebank is a professional entertainer who, mounted on a platform or stage, uses stories, tricks, juggling, often assisted by a professional clown or fool, uses theatrical performance as a means of persuading an audience to purchase his goods, usually quack medicine. As with any poet, the mountebank manipulates the audience through his creative abilities. The mountebank episode in *Volpone* displays such a scene of entertainment and manipulation through theatrical and linguistic means.

Disguised as Scoto of Mantua, a Venetian mountebank, Volpone demonstrates the narrative and rhetorical arts peculiar to the salesman and promotor of quack medicine. The mountebank's aim is to exploit his hearer's fear of death and a general fascination with illness, especially one's own. He uses several strategies. First, Scoto establishes his own status and position within the mountebank hierarchy. To account for his appearance at such an "obscure nook of the Piazza" (II, ii), he claims that he

wishes to dissociate himself from the "ground ciarlitani" who are mere underlings, "turdy-facy-nasty-paty-lousy-fartical rogues" (II, ii) for whom he has contempt. They are inferior because their stories are tired and unoriginal; they "come in lamely, with their moldy tales out of Boccaccio", and they tell false stories of "their tedious captivity in the Turks' galleys, when, indeed, were the truth known, they were the Christians' galleys" (II, ii). Their crime is poor creative capacities. Their fictions are incompetent because the details are not accurate. As representations, therefore, they are faulty as well as "moldy". Scoto's aim is to promote his own veracity. He attempts, therefore, to discredit his competition by suggesting that they are liars. Thus, he discredits a rumour spread by his "impudent detractor" Alessandro Buttone, "who gave out in public I was condemned a Sforzato to the galleys, for poisoning the Cardinal Bembo's - cook." (II, ii) If the audience is clever enough, it will notice that Scoto Mantuano does not deny the accusation; he merely says the tale has not "dejected" him. Scoto's contempt of his inferiors is based on their poor narrative skills. He, on the other hand, offers a "scene of pleasure and delight." (II, ii) Furthermore his trustworthiness is guaranteed by his disinterested motives: "I have nothing to sell, little or nothing to sell." (II, ii) Again, Scoto's language must be scrutinized closely for the subtle qualification he adds to his claim that he has "nothing" to sell. A minor

deception has taken place, but one typical of a salesman who relies on such linguistic nuances to insinuate his way into the confidence of the spectator. At this point in Scoto's discourse, his audience might be encouraged to think that he is there solely for their pleasure and not his profit; but that he has "little" to sell is not because he is there for another purpose, simply to provide pleasurable entertainment; because his 'precious liquor" is so popular with rich city gentlemen, he cannot keep up with the demand and has none left to sell. But the idea at the centre of this communication has little to do with his supply of oil. Rather, his claim that the rich are eager to buy his medicine is intended to appeal to a commoner's desire to mimic the behaviour of the upper class. That "worshipful merchants; ay, and senators too" III, ii) frequent his lodging to obtain his product, lends it credibility and makes it attractive to the lower classes. Scoto is working with the categories of rich and poor in an effort to include the "mob" with other orders of society through an appeal to the universal desire for health and fear of death: "O, health! health! the blessing of the rich! the riches of the poor! who can buy thee at too dear a rate, since there is no enjoying this world without thee?" (II, ii) The desire for health cuts across all social boundaries, but Scoto's pitch also depends on an assumed wish of the "mob": to aspire to the buying power of the rich. The direct pitch immediately follows: "Be not then so sparing of your purses, honourable

gentlemen, as to abridge the natural course of life--".(II, ii)

Once Scoto has planted such suggestions into the minds of his hearers, his sales pitch intensifies and displays his full power of invention. He cannot be charged with being a teller of "moldy tales"; speaking with imagery and force, he makes no vague claims for his "oglio del Scoto" but gives specific information about its restorative powers. It can cure an incredible range of bodily ills, from an "indigest and crude stomach" and "vertigine in the head" to all manner of "cramps, convulsions, paralyses, epilepsies, Tremor-Cordia, retired nerves, ill vapors of the spleen, stoppings of the liver" (II, ii) etc. etc. He talks with style, confidence, and without hesitation on human anatomy and disease, creating the impression that he is an authority outrivaling Hippocrates or Galen as Nano's song states. Although he does not enumerate them, he claims to have a "countless catalogue of those [he] has cured of the aforesaid". (II, ii) The "depositions of those that appeared on [his] part, before the signory of the Sanita and most learned College of Physicians" (II, ii) is called in to support his claim to authority. In fact, he is there before them by special authorization of the College - Scoto's claim that he has the backing of a respected institution is designed to impress the spectators by his connection with officialdom; he relies on the persuasive power behind

institutional recognition to convince the spectators that he is authentic and not an impostor.

His efforts would not be complete without once again feigning disinterest and detachment: if he had "but time to discourse" on the "miraculous effects" of his oil, he would. (II, ii) And, of course, he doesn't care about money and will sell his oil at a cost far below its real value. All of Scoto's rhetoric is designed to simultaneously convince his hearers of his veracity and credibility and to entertain them with his theatrical abilities. He operates with a simple principle in mind: a sales pitch that delights and entertains is more likely to be persuasive. Scoto attempts to make his audience pliable and the pleasure produced by an artist's presentation predisposes the audience to first listen and then be convinced.

The specific effect of Scoto's rhetoric is debated by Peregrine, who is skeptical, and Sir Politick Would-be, who is easily seduced by Scoto's language. Although Sir Pol does not purchase the miraculous oil, he claims to be impressed by the power of Scoto's language itself and to be thrilled by the hearing of it. While Peregrine identifies Scoto as a member of those "lewd impostors" and is, therefore, disreputable and dismissable, Sir Pol is impressed by words: "Ha' you heard better language, sir?" (II, ii) and "Is not his language rare?" (II, ii) Furthermore, Sir Pol believes the Italian mountebanks to be the most educated of men:

> They are the only knowing men of Europe!
> Great general scholars, excellent physicians,
> Most admired statesmen, professed favorites,
> And cabinet counselors to the greatest princes;
> The only languaged men of all the world! (II, ii, 9-13)

Peregrine does not grasp the irony of Sir Pol's lavish praise, but Jonson's satire on influential and 'learned' men, equating them with mountebanks, is not lost on his audience. But Sir Pol's statement that mountebanks are the "only languaged men of all the world" is perhaps most relevant to this discussion. Indeed, Volpone as Scoto is a "great talker" but Peregrine's response outlines the difference between language as mere display and language which has knowledge as its foundation:
"I have heard, they are most lewd impostors;/Made all of terms and shreds". (II, ii, 14-15) Scoto has been identified as one of those wits who can only "mock at the terms". His discourse is comprised of "terms and shreds"; it lacks substance or genuine "matter" and its meaning, therefore, cannot be trusted.

Perhaps so, but Volpone's impersonation of an Italian mountebank is nonetheless an authentic representation - his is a fine performance, perhaps as good as his performance as "young Antinous", when he "attracted/The eyes and ears of all the ladies present." (III, vii, 162-3) Despite Peregrine's justified skepticism, Volpone is convincing as a mountebank and as an entertainer. He is able to imitate the rhetorical skills of a salesman because language does have its mimetic capacities and can create such likenesses,

but this notion refers only to the authenticity of the representation, its realism, not of reality itself. On the other hand, because meaning is not truly embodied within language, there is a paradox at work in these gulling comedies. The theatrical metaphor which is used, where characters act various parts, successfully creating a number of convincing identities for themselves, demonstrates that language functions mimetically; but in this capacity it also facilitates deceit - the likeness (its realism) is also the basis of its deception.

The entire mountebank episode is a deceit on a number of levels. First, it is a fiction, a clever invention involving disguise and linguistic ingenuity, where Volpone adopts a new identity to put himself in contact with Celia. But in the role of mountebank, Volpone is doubly a "lewd imposter" for he impersonates a figure that is associated unequivocally with deception and manipulation. However, the disguise is also consistent with Volpone's essential role in the play as Volpone/Scoto are two sides of the same coin. Scoto is a logical extension of Volpone himself: in both guises he is an actor, charlatan, and con-artist endeavouring to dupe the unwitting out of their money. As Volpone and Mosca plan the means of viewing Celia, Volpone indicates that whatever the disguise, he must still retain his identity: "I must/Maintain mine own shape still the same". (II, i, 129-30) And indeed he does. For the audience, Volpone is simultaneously disguised and

recognizable in the role of Scoto of Mantua, and as such, this use of multiple identities reveals that identity itself as a signifier is unreliable. Here, Volpone's disguise signifies not necessarily an entirely new identity, but rather the instability of any identity itself.

The role of the mountebank is an ironic yet especially suitable one for Volpone the Fox, linked as he is to death, disease and trickery. His main role in the deception of the gulls is to feign illness and approaching death, but there is also an ironic play here on Volpone's association with medicine. As Scoto he is a promotor of quack medicine, but as Volpone he has "no faith in physic". (I, iv, 20) As Mosca tells Corbaccio, "He will not hear of drugs" (I, iv, 14). Corbaccio, in an attempt to assist Volpone, has his doctor prepare an opiate, merely to make him sleep. "Ay, his last sleep, if he would take it" (I, iv, 18) Volpone tells the audience. We are reminded of the unsolved mystery of the poisoning of Cardinal Bembo's cook.

Jonson also explores the practice of deceit on the rhetorical level by demonstrating institutionalized deceit as it is practiced by the legal profession. Voltore, as the "vulture", is well suited to the role of the lawyer, a person who benefits from the demise and misfortune of others, primarily by a manipulative use of language. Jonson's antagonistic treatment of the character of the lawyer in *Volpone* is one which can be found throughout

English literature. Mosca sums up the essential attributes of the lawyer in his praise to Voltore:

> I oft have heard him [Volpone] say how he admired
> Men of your large profession, that could speak
> To every cause, and things mere contraries,
> Till they were hoarse again, yet all be law;
> That, with most quick agility, could turn
> And re-turn; make knots, and undo them;
> Give forked counsel; take provoking gold
> On either hand, and put it up; (I, iii, 52-59)

Mosca's description emphasizes how important the manipulation of language is to Voltore's profession. The unstable nature of the signifying process is implicit in his satire of the lawyer, as he recognizes that lawyers could not operate as they do were meaning clearly fixed with language. That language is malleable and can serve dishonest interests is demonstrated in the first courtroom scene where Celia and Bonario are on trial for adultery and an attempted patricide. The trial is itself a kind of performance conducted primarily by Voltore, a drama which is enacted with theatrical flourish and which is a well-structured and stylized fiction in the form of a legal argument. Voltore's rhetorical skills are demonstrated during the trial. Like Volpone in the role of the mountebank, Voltore displays a show of confidence: "we have no reason/To fear our truth should hurt our cause" (IV, iv 27-28), and employs familiar courtroom strategies. To discredit Celia, she is charged with possessing the deceptive arts 'natural' to a woman: "This lewd woman,/That wants no artificial looks or tears/To help the vizor she has now put on" (IV, v 34-36). As signifiers, tears are usually

accepted as signifying genuine emotion; because they are difficult to fake, tears often elicit belief. But Voltore argues that Celia's deception is so well wrought that she can effectively produce tears and an authentic look of distress at will. In the English language, allowance is made for tears which signify hypocrisy. Thus, Celia is accused of using "crocodile tears" to lure the court into trusting her innocence. In this sense, they are a sign that Jonson also uses in *Epicoene* as Morose dismisses Epicoene's tears with "away, crocodile", believing her to be a hypocrite. As signs, then, tears are not considered conclusive evidence of truth or sincerity, and the court can be made to doubt Celia and believe her emotion to be a mere performance.

Voltore makes Celia and Bonario's adultery appear plausible, providing the rationale or motivation necessary for the court. This is essential for he must overcome their previously unblemished reputations and he does so by cleverly pointing out the difficulty of distinguishing between virtue and vice: "So much more full of danger is his vice,/That can beguile so, under shade of virtue" (IV, v, 70-1). Here Voltore suggests how easily the distinction between virtue and vice can be obscured and confused, despite the assumption that, as opposites, they are clearly distinguishable.

Up to this point Voltore argues by means of innuendo and suggestion, essentially undermining Bonario and Celia's

position with the court. But the question of proof must be addressed as it is not enough merely to plant doubt and suspicion in the minds of the Avocatori. In terms of the relationship between deceit and signification, the issue of proof is an important one. The role of the witness in the justice system is examined as it is the proofs they will present which are intended to signify the truth of the charges against Celia and Bonario. First, the wronged father, Corbaccio appears. Although his "testimony's craved" by the court, his testimony is, in fact, no testimony at all. He does not address the court, but deliberately reinterprets his task to mean that he must address his speech to his son which he will not do: "Speak to the knave?/I'll have my mouth first stopped with earth" (IV, v, 106-7). As a result, his testimony amounts to nothing, yet the court does not question this. He is not required to support Voltore's claim that he was to be the victim of a patricide and thus avoids having to lie outright. His testimony does not fulfill the requirement of proof.

The next witness is Corvino, Celia's husband and proclaimed cuckold. His testimony is rather confusing. He confirms Voltore's report that Celia and Bonario were "taken in the act" by him, but he does so using figurative language, a metaphor that by its very nature has numerous interpretive possibilities. He has seen Celia "glued unto that piece of cedar,/That fine well-timbered gallant" (IV,

v, 123-4). And he appears to produce letters which ostensibly have been exchanged between Celia and Bonario, but this is ambiguous. He makes the horned sign of the cuckold, two fingers held over his head, and says that "The letters may be read, through the horn,/That make the story perfect." (IV, v, 125-6) The sign, or proof, therefore, of Celia's adultery, turns out to be a mere signifying convention, a symbol the court recognizes and deems sufficient. It does not "make the story perfect" as Corvino claims, but in this court, the "perfect" story does not appear to be necessary. Of further significance, however, is Corvino's testament that the Avocatori are indeed witnessing a "story", an organized fiction which, although it has gaps and takes suspicious turns, they do not question.

The final strategy of the confederates is another witness, Lady Would-be, willing to perjure herself outright and give false testimony against Celia. Although she has been manipulated by Mosca, Lady Would-Be is a most willing gull. Persuaded to believe that Sir Pol is unfaithful, she first mistakes Peregrine for her husband's consort, believing him to be in disguise: "a female devil, in a male outside." (IV, iii, 56) Taking advantage of her error, Mosca corrects her and leads her to the court where he claims the real "creature" has been apprehended. When Lady Would-Be testifies against Celia, therefore, she does so without ever having seen her - Mosca's word is sufficient.

The court is also manipulated through the emotional impact that language can have when used with rhetorical force. Jonson mimics well in the speech of Voltore the rhetorical flourish and rhythm of the language of the lawyer:

> ...Wherein I pray your fatherhoods
> To observe the malice, yea, the rage of creatures
> Discovered in their evils; and what heart
> Such take, even from their crimes....(V, iv, 49-52)

And further:

> I tremble to pronounce it, that a son
> Unto a father, and to such a father,
> Should have so foul, felonious intent!
> It was to murder him. When, being prevented
> By his more happy absence, what then did he?
> Not check his wicked thoughts; no, now new deeds;
> (Mischief doth never end where it begins)
> An act of horror, fathers!... (IV, v, 73-80)

Voltore's speech has an oratorical quality, filled with emotion as his argument builds to its climax, and then recedes. As such, it appeals on an aesthetic level - his even, metered language is pleasant to hear - and exploits the human tendency to become swept up in the lyricism of language. The court can be expected to have a similar response to that of Sir Pol when he is thrilled by the sound of Scoto's sales pitch. Such rhetoric, because it pleases its hearers, also predisposes them to believe its claim to truth.

Voltore also appeals to the Avocatori on an emotional level when he repeatedly refers to them as "fathers" or "your fatherhoods". It is an attempt to emphasize the crime of patricide and to encourage them to identify with

Corbaccio as a victim of a son's unnatural desire. He also manipulates the court through flattery declaring "I know this place most void of prejudice" (IV, v, 26) to demonstrate that he recognizes the authority and integrity of the court. Bonario, on the other hand, does not display any political skills whatsoever. On the contrary, he manages to offend the court by slandering Voltore, failing to recognize that by doing so, he is perceived as attempting to discredit the entire legal profession, which inevitably includes the Avocatori. He is reminded, "You do forget yourself" (IV, v, 98). And indeed he does; he has succeeded in alienating and offending the court, allowing Voltore to take advantage of its willingness to believe Bonario guilty of patricide. Celia can only lament and hope for divine intervention, believing that heaven "never fails the innocent" (IV, vi, 16). Both Celia and Bonario are completely ineffectual in their defense. In addition to Bonario's impolitic remarks, neither defendant can produce any 'proof'or key signifiers that could convey their innocence to the biased court. Celia's swoon, like her tears, is dismissed as "Prettily feigned" (IV, v, 133). She is repeatedly charged with being an actress, a "chameleon" (IV, vi, 2) with "too many moods" (IV, v, 142) to be trusted. Voltore warns the court: "May her feignings/Not take your wisdoms" (IV, vi, 146-7). Ironically, of course, Celia is anything but changeable - her "defense" is simple and consistent. Trusting to a "just God", she appeals to

the higher, divine justice, thus revealing an important distinction in the Christian ethos between secular and divine justice, the latter holding out the hope that injustice in this world will be corrected in the next.

In *The Alchemist* Jonson also uses language as an essential mechanism driving the practice of deceit. Once again he creates specific discourses that are rhetorically powerful and assist in the gulling of the dupes. The most conspicuous discourse in *The Alchemist* is the rhetoric of alchemy itself. That it is a language which lends itself to deception is suggested by Peregrine in *Volpone*, when he perceives a connection between Scoto's sales pitch and alchemical jargon: "But alchemy,/I never heard the like" (II, ii). Peregrine's response to Scoto is somewhat ambivalent. He is at once amazed by the virtuosity of his rhetoric without accepting it as sincere. He understands that Scoto is a charlatan, yet he is impressed by Scoto's skill.

The language of alchemy qualifies as a metalanguage or jargon as it is the discourse of a particular discipline. As such, it presents certain problems for signifying practice - only those familiar with the discipline are able to understand its terms. It functions like a code which can only be decoded by those who recognize its signs. "I mean to tinct C in sand-heat tomorrow,/And give him imbibition." (II, iii, 58-9) Anyone unfamiliar with alchemy will not understand Subtle's intentions in the above statement.

Consequently, alchemical jargon also presents unique opportunities to perpetuate deception. Such a language creates special difficulties for interpretation and communication because it creates a situation where interpretation is either difficult or may not even be possible. Therefore, any communication that takes place between an alchemist and one who is outside the discourse creates the situation where a genuine, two-way communication cannot take place because one party has no way of understanding both elements of the signifying act - signifier and signified. In such a case the referents of that language must remain a mystery. The party that has no knowledge of the signs can accept on the basis of faith alone the truth or sincerity of any statement and that a deception is not taking place. This circumstance, however, is unlikely to persist; individuals tend to try to learn the language of a discipline so that they may participate equally in the communication. It would appear that Sir Epicure Mammon is such a character: he is able to speak with some fluency on alchemical procedures and he comprehends the conversation between Subtle and Face in regard to the progress of the philosopher's stone and the upcoming moment of "projection". He is nonetheless completely deceived and that he is so is related mainly to his faith in the science of alchemy itself and his conviction that it will make him rich and powerful, putting him in a position where he can indulge his various appetites. His faith severely impairs

his judgement; the result is that he cannot read the signs of deception that are present in the communications between Subtle and Face. Mammon's knowledge of the terms does not give him access to the real objectives of Subtle and Face's commuunication which is, of course, to extort money from Mammon. His familiarity with alchemical terminology demonstrates merely an agreement on the terms of the discourse which, although it can produce the appearance of communication, does not exclude the possibility of an underlying subtext which remains hidden to those incapable of perceiving it.

In "Rethinking About Alchemy in Jonson's *The Alchemist*", Renu Juneja believes that Jonson's "great familiarity with alchemy - his careful culling of alchemical terminology and the exactness of his knowledge of alchemical processes" is a sign of his interest, even "fascination" with the subject (6). It is also typical of Jonson to be sure to demonstrate such knowledge to his audience; we are treated to an abundance of alchemical terms and procedures, a virtual display of rhetoric that resembles Scoto's sales pitch in its virtuosity. Subtle is the main performer as he speaks at length on the subject, displaying the astuteness of his understanding of the science through the confidence and aplomb with which he uses its terminology. Surly's role in the drama is similar to Peregrine's - he is the skeptic who "would not willingly be gulled" (II, ii, 78). Surly responds to Subtle's rhetoric by calling it a "brave

language...next to canting". (II, iii, 42) That he connects alchemical jargon with "canting", the special language of thieves, is a sign of his contempt and distrust. But he also recognizes an important feature of the jargon itself - that it is a "brave" language refers to its ostentation, its showiness. In addition to the familiar connotation of "brave" - daring or courageous - the term also means to be "finely dressed", "splendid" or "showy". Surly is making a connection between language and clothing which can be found in *Discoveries* as well where Jonson connects the deceptive potential of clothing - "a good dressing" - and language. Jonson uses the metaphor of "dressing" to express his suspicions of the relationship between language and deceit:

> It is an art to have so much judgement, as to apparel a lie well, to give it a good dressing; that though the nakedness would show deformed and odious, the suiting of it might draw their readers. Some love any strumpet (be she never so shop-like, or meritorious) in good clothes. (386-390)

While Jonson recognizes the artistry involved in creating an effective lie, this statement recognizes that linguistic skills can be used to facilitate deception. In the statement below the clothing/adornment metaphor has been extended to apply explicitly to linguistic expression:

> ...now nothing is good that is natural: right and natural language seems to have least of the wit in it; that which is writhed and tortured, is counted the more exquisite. Cloth of bodkin, or tissue, must be embroidered; as if no face were fair, that were not powdered, or painted! No beauty to be had, but in wresting, and writhing our own tongues!

> Nothing is fashionable, till it be deformed; and this is to write like a gentleman. All must be as affected, and preposterous as our gallants' clothes, sweet bags, and night-dressings: in which you would think our men lay in, like ladies: it is so curious. (*Discoveries* 714-727)

That Jonson perceived a connection between affected language and the affectation of human apparel is not surprising. Clothing and language are both sign systems which are used as a means of communication. Jonson's complaint here is that the plain and simple have no value; to be fashionable, these forms of expression must be ostentatious and "embroidered". For Surly, alchemical language, and hence alchemy itself, is untrustworthy because it, too, is "embroidered".

As a non-believer, Surly scrutinizes the dialogue between Face and Subtle, and by close attention to their language, quickly concludes that a trap is being set for Mammon. He is able to identify the various stages in the gulling of Mammon in Scene iii of Act II, as the two rogues endeavour to extract further monies from Mammon, ostensibly to further their efforts to produce the philosopher's stone. The conversation between Subtle, the 'scientist', and Face, his assistant, wherein Face provides progress reports and Subtle gives directions on procedure, functions as a display of their knowledge and familiarity with alchemy; its purpose is to impress Mammon. And this is precisely what Mammon sees, suspecting nothing. Surly, on the other hand, is on the look-out for something else - he watches for the signs

of fraud and focuses on key statements that he considers part of an overall strategy. The first signal Surly perceives is Subtle's concern that one of their works "wants something" - the colour is not perfect as it is not of the "crow". (II, iii, 69-70) Surly quickly scents something: "O, I looked for this. The hay's a pitching." (II,iii, 71-2) He is already silently projecting what this small snag might lead to. He is not kept waiting long to find out - due to a problem with one of the combinations, Subtle declares: "We should have a new amalgama." (II, iii, 80) Surly uses a metaphor of scent to express his knowledge of the deception underway: "O, this ferret/Is rank as any pole cat." (II,iii, 81-2) Subtle, adopting an unconcerned, dismissive attitude is willing to let the faulty "amalgama" die but Face argues on the side of caution: "I would not you should let/Any die now, if I might counsel, sir,/For luck's sake to the rest: it is not good." (II, iii, 85-7) There is no logic behind Face's warning; he appeals to superstitious fears and Mammon takes the bait: "He says right."(II, iii, 88) Surly recognizes that the deception is now secure: "Ay, are you bolted?" (II, iii, 89) and watches as Mammon is cozened of ten pounds for a mere "three ounces/of fresh materials." (II, iii, 90) Subtle is careful to leave the impression that Mammon is in control and has made the decision himself: "This needs not; but that you will have it so" (II,iii, 95). Mammon considers himself a financier, investing in a project which he believes will bring him

enormous returns. Surly considers him to be cozened, made a dupe by clever rogues. Subtle and Face's language, therefore, is interpreted much differently by Mammon and Surly; the same signifiers have led to very different conclusions. Surly, acting as the detached observer, reads the signs of cozenage and it is his skepticism, which informs his critical judgement, that enables him to do this. Mammon, as a true believer, must interpret according to his faith - he cannot perceive the clues which are clearly evident to Surly and to the audience. That the readings of these two characters are radically different, once again, focuses our attention on the problematic issues of signification and meaning, issues which seem to preoccupy Jonson.

Once Mammon is cozened, the scene proceeds to an exchange between Subtle and Surly which in terms of Jonson's exploration of language and his interest in the many interpretive possibilities inherent in signifying practice, is very important. Surly accuses alchemy of being "a pretty kind of game,/Somewhat like tricks o' the cards, to cheat a man/With charming" (II, iii, 180-2), and addresses directly the signification of alchemical language: "What else are all your terms,/Whereon no one of your writers 'grees with other?" (II, iii, 183-4) Subtle's response does not address Surly's concern that as the language of a particular discipline, there is no agreement amongst its practitioners as to the meaning of its terms, but he does explain the

function of alchemical jargon: it is intended to obscure the art of alchemy rather than to illuminate it. As Mammon explains, such opaque language is needed so that "the simple idiot should not learn it,/And make it vulgar." (II, iii, 201-2) Subtle, then, points out that language can readily be used for purposes of obfuscation rather than reliable and fluent communication. He defends this practice by referring to ancient precedents:

> Was not all the knowledge
> Of the Egyptians writ in mystic symbols?
> Speak not the Scriptures oft in parables?
> Are not the choicest fables of the poets,
> That were the fountains and first springs of wisdom,
> Wrapped in perplexed allegories? (II, iii, 103-7)

Subtle believes such comparisons lend authority to the alchemist's jargon, including it amongst sign systems which have a history of hermeneutical study associated with them. Jonson, of course, is satirizing alchemical language. While Subtle's point is well taken, he refers to signifying practices which are not suspected for deliberate attempts to deceive; alchemy does not enjoy the same reputation as the Biblical parable. That Subtle includes alchemy with such respectable company further damns him and his professed art. Jonson's satire of alchemical language, however, also highlights the difficulty of decoding particular discourses and the possibilities for deception which are created as a result. Surly is correct - specific discourses can obfuscate meaning, whether the terms are chosen "judiciously" or not. And Jonson does not exclude the

"allegories" of poets: of all arts, literature often deliberately focuses attention on the problems and difficulties of interpretation. Mammon's attempt to defend the language relies on a rather elitist argument and, as such, can be dismissed as a weak attempt to privilege the science of alchemy and increase its status. His self-interested motives make him an unreliable defender of the science.

The very existence of specific discourses, understood only by a select group, makes the claims Jonson advances for language rather problematic. Although his theory of language must be seen as an expression of an ideal of writing, where meaning is clear, stable and fixed, it is also clearly evident that he is interested in linguistic practices that in no way meet such an ideal, both in terms of the potential for comedy in signifying practices that undermine clear meaning, and in intellectual and critical interests, exploring the interpretive issues involved in numerous sign systems. The successful practice of deceit refutes the idea that fixed meaning can be guaranteed, and in terms of the aims of Jonson's dramatic practice, such fixed meaning is hardly desirable. The source of the humour and wit of Jonson's gulling comedies can often be found in the play of meaning. How else can we enjoy, for example, Abel Drugger's failure to comprehend Subtle's metoposcopic reading of his face? He has no way of knowing that he is actually being told that he is in danger from thieves; only

someone versed in the art of metoposcopy could catch the ironic play of Subtle's reading.

Jonson is not only interested in the possibilities for deception inherent in the signifying process itself. He also pays close attention to the gulls' willingness to be deceived because he is concerned with critical blindness. The gulls are unable to distinguish between truth and fiction because, first of all, they are fools and as such, are lacking in critical ability. But, really, this is a partial and inadequate answer because it does not take into account an important theme in Jonson's creative and critical writing. The gulls are manipulated not only because they lack the necessary critical abilities essential to an exercise of good judgement, but also, from a moral point of view, because they are seriously flawed characters, motivated by greed and ambition. The inability to discern the presence of deceit must not only be viewed with regard to the flexibility of signification, but must also be related to those factors which impair an individual's judgement.

In *Volpone*, Mosca's capacity to manipulate and deceive Voltore, Corvino and Corbaccio depends not only on his talent for "quick fiction", but also on their eagerness to be deceived. Obsessed with greedy self-interest, their avarice disables any capacity they may have to detect the lies that are perpetrated upon them. They have an investment in believing all Mosca tells them - any suspicion

that they are the mere dupes of Volpone's and Mosca's malicious amusement must inevitably compromise their ambition for, if the truth is revealed, they must give up the hope of acquiring Volpone's fortune. Volpone and Mosca express incredulity at how easily they are fooled. Volpone can scarce believe "That these, being so divided 'mongst themselves,/Should not scent somewhat, or in me or thee" (V, ii, 20-21). Mosca has the answer:

> True, they will not see't.
> Too much light blinds them, I think. Each of them
> Is so possessed and stuffed with his own hopes,
> That anything unto the contrary,
> Never so true, or never so apparent,
> Never so palpable, they will resist it-- (V, ii, 23-27)

The metaphor of blinding light is appropriate here. As Mosca points out, were evidence to be produced to reveal the fraud, Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino would be determined to "resist it", for to do otherwise would necessitate the abandonment of ambition. Like Volpone, they are self-obsessed and the result is that they cannot see beyond the narrow confines of their desire. They are controlled by their extravagant greed, and all capacity to distinguish between truth and fiction is rendered ineffectual.

An example of their unwillingness to ascertain the sincerity of Volpone and Mosca can be found in their neglect of the will itself. They are concerned with whose name has been written in as beneficiary, but none of the three suspects its authenticity or insists on viewing the will. As a document it functions as a sign of the fraud which takes place.

The theory of the sign proposed by the philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce is helpful in understanding the function of the will. According to Saussurian linguistics, the linguistic sign is composed of two elements, the signifier and its signified. Peirce's theory adds a third, phenomenological component. In his terms the sign is composed of the sign, its object, and its interpretant. We use signs to represent things so that we may communicate.

> A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. (Peirce, 99)

But in order to fully comprehend an object, we must have prior acquaintance with it - the sign itself is insufficient: "The sign can only represent the object and tell about it. It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that object" (100). Peirce provides an anecdote which clarifies his point about the importance of prior acquaintance:

> Two men are standing on the seashore looking out to sea. One of them says to the other, "That vessel there carries no freight at all, but only passengers." Now, if the other, himself, sees no vessel, the first information he derives from the remark has for its Object the part of the sea that he does not see, and informs him that a person with sharper eyes than his, or more trained in looking for such things, can see a vessel there; and then, that vessel having been thus introduced to his acquaintance, he is prepared to receive the information about it that it carries passengers exclusively. But the

> sentence as a whole has, for the person supposed, no other Object than that with which it finds him already acquainted.

Peirce does not consider here the possibility that the first speaker is lying and the vessel does not exist, but Ben Jonson uses precisely this strategy to demonstrate how deceit takes place on the phenomenological level. If we exchange the vessel for the will we can see how the will functions as an element of the deceit. The dupes understand the idea of the will, that it has legal status and puts the beneficiary named in possession of its contents. They have, therefore, the necessary prior acquaintance with this particular sign to understand any communication upon it. They are, however, unwilling to test their hopes against the actuality of its existence. Thus, when Mosca asks Voltore, "When will you have your inventory brought, sir?/Or see a copy of the will?" (I, i 75-76), he meets with no response. This is purportedly due to the fact that Corbaccio has arrived and Voltore must rush out, with Mosca promising to bring the will to him at a later time. But Mosca has only promised a "copy" of the will, not the authentic document - the possibility of a forgery, a fake document with no legal value - is evident. The will functions as a signifier of Volpone's estate. The inventory which Mosca promises to Voltore, and later is seen writing up once he becomes heir, also signifies Volpone's fortune but it has no legal status; only the authentic will itself can unite the beneficiary with its contents. And there can only be <u>one</u> will, not the

many "blanks" Volpone keeps stored away. However, the will threatens to become real when Volpone feigns death and a name has been written in as beneficiary - Mosca's - and he fully undertands the significance of this event. The will is finally produced on stage as part of the strategy to torment the three dupes. Mosca, busy with his inventory, tosses the will to them and they grapple to read who it names as heir. That they are slow to realize that they have been fooled, demonstrates their reluctance to acknowledge the fact that they have accepted the authenticity of the will on trust, having "prior acquaintance" of its signification. Voltore, in particular, refuses to believe that Mosca is, finally, sincere. Once Corbaccio and Corvino leave enraged, he urges Mosca to dispense with the game: "Now, my faithful Mosca,/I find thy constancy--...Sincere" (V, iii 77-78). As Mosca has said, "Too much light blinds them" (V, ii 24). In Peirce's terms, Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino are unwilling to test their perceptions against experience. Experience is constituted by "the compulsion, the absolute constraint upon us to think otherwise than we have been thinking" (89). It is this that the three dupes neglect to do, and in the interests of the drama, must not do. It is Mosca, in his role as his heir, who forces the knowledge upon them that they have been deceived.

Mammon also suffers from a similar form of critical blindness. That he is deceived by the rogues in addition to being self-deceived is alluded to by Surly: "...can it

be/That a grave sir, a rich, that has no need,/A wise sir, too, at other times, should thus/With his own oaths and arguments make hard means/To gull himself?" (II, iii, 278-82). Mammon's case however, is somewhat different - while he is similarly motivated by greed, alchemy also has the capacity to inspire almost a religious faith in its proponents. Mammon's belief in the reality of alchemy and the benefits that will accrue to him once he possesses the philosopher's stone has the quality of complete conviction - he has no doubts regarding the science itself, and he trusts Subtle and Face. In The Alchemist, Jonson treats the issue of faith, including religious faith, as a distinct theme of the drama. During the first meeting with Subtle, Mammon introduces Surly as "An heretic, that I did bring along,/In hope, sir, to convert him." (II, iii, 3-4) In a dialogue which precedes this meeting, Mammon accuses Surly of being "not faithful" because he doubts the authenticity of alchemy as a science. Mammon is convinced that the production of the philosopher's stone will be a real event and once accomplished, he will "change/All that is metal, in my house, to gold" (II, i, 30). The outer room in Lovewit's house becomes for Mammon the "Novo Orbe...the rich Peru;/And there within...are the golden mines" (II, i, 2-3). The play is set on the very day that Mammon believes he will "pronounce the happy word, be rich" (II, i, 7), and Mammon assures Surly that when he sees "th'effects of the great medicine", he, too, will be convinced that the claims

alchemists make are real. To argue his point further, Mammon refers to the records of antiquity, the documentation that proves alchemy is both ancient and authentic:

> Will you believe antiquity? records?
> I'll show you a book where Moses and his sister,
> And Solomon have written of the art;
> Ay, and a treatise penned by Adam...
> Of the philosopher's stone, and in High Dutch." (II, i, 80-84)

Mammon's reference to historical documents to support his argument is the common practice used to verify the historicity of a given event or claim, but that he refers to biblical records emphasizes that his belief in the stone is a matter of religious faith.

Similar to the gulls in *Volpone*, Mammon does not feel compelled to test his faith. The laboratory in *The Alchemist* has a similar function to that of the will, although there are some important differences. The characters do not question its existence although they never see it and it is never made visible to the audience on stage. Like the will, its reality or authenticity is assumed by the dupes and they express no urge to test it. This is especially significant with regard to Sir Epicure Mammon who otherwise demonstrates considerable acquaintance with the alchemical process and appears to have some interest in the technicalities of each stage, eagerly anticipating the phase of "projection" when the philosopher's stone will be produced and the ability to transform metals into gold will be a reality. To some degree, the function of the laboratory can be explained

using Keir Elam's notion of the "possible worlds" of theatrical performance, which is "concerned with the 'world creating' operations of texts and the conceptual labours they call for from their decoders (readers, spectators, etc)." (101) For the decoders of The Alchemist, the lab is a setting, a room in the house that is presumably outfitted with an alchemist's equipment. Although it must be imagined by both audience and characters of the drama, it is assumed to be present spatially and temporally, even though it is 'off-stage'. The audience and characters, therefore, must "project" its existence which is to engage in a creative act. "Project" relates to human mental or imaginative capacities, that is, it is a mental concept or idea and it is also the activity of creating such a concept. The term is also specifically associated with alchemy: to project means according to the OED to throw the powder of projection into a crucible of melted metal, for the purpose of transmuting the latter into gold or silver. "Projection" is also that stage of the alchemical process so eagerly awaited by Sir Epicure. Therefore, project/projection combines the notions of mental conception - creativity or "quick fiction" - with the alchemical process itself. The audience must project or create a representation of the laboratory and the advances in the stages of alchemy which are reported to be taking place there. This is an imaginative act and is, therefore, a feature of our own ability to indulge in the creation of a fiction of our own. Hence the audience is

drawn into a specific creative act and we do not have the opportunity to check our fiction against any external reality. Thus, we must behave in the manner Peirce questions and expresses scorn for. This constraint upon the audience is further complicated by the fact that few of us, if any, have had a "prior acquaintance" with an alchemist's laboratory. The characters, however, are not so constrained. It would not be amiss for Sir Epicure or any of the other dupes to request a visit to the lab. For Sir Epicure, the desire to witness the progress of the "projection" would be a sharpening of his expectations and is certainly dramatically plausible. While Jonson has his own interest in preventing any such viewing of the lab - as with the will, in the interests of the plot it is essential that the dupes do not question the veracity of the confederates - it is still possible that a convincing representation of the lab could be presented to the dupes, on or off stage. A laboratory, conceivably, could be fabricated, as a will or a letter can be forged. In fact, Lovewit discovers "A few cracked pots and glasses, and a furnace" (V, v, 40), presumably the remnants of the rogues' enterprise.

But Jonson also makes the point in these two plays that visual perception cannot be trusted to ascertain the truth. As Face declares to Lovewit, "'Tis all deceptio visus." (V, iii, 62) In a test of Volpone's powers of apprehension, Mosca shouts insults into his master's ear, while Volpone

feigns oblivion. Corvino, who has observed this performance, is disbelieving of Volpone's incapacitated state but Mosca tells him, "credit your own sense" (I, v 51). Corvino does so but, of course, it does not gain him access to the truth. His "sense" tells him that Volpone is unconscious; it does not reveal to him the fraud that is being passed upon him. Similarly, Surly recognizes that his eyes may deceive him when he responds to Mammon's assertion that "th'effects of the great medicine" will convert or "transmute" him into a true believer:

> Yes, when I see't, I will.
> But if my eyes do cozen me so, and I
> Giving them no occasion, sure I'll have
> A whore, shall piss them out, next day. (II, i, 41-44)

Surly makes a dual point: implicitly he acknowledges that visual perception is preferable to complete ignorance. He also understands that seeing is not necessarily believing. He is careful to make an important distinction between willful self-deception, of which he accuses Mammon, and the individual who unwittingly falls prey to a fraud. In either case, visual perception is not a reliable means of detecting deceit. Mosca's metaphor of blinding light is appropriate here - the dupes suffer from critical blindness - yet their gulling is not only a result of "too much light", but that it is indeed possible to cozen the "eyes". This coupled with that property of language, the arbitrary nature of the sign, provides ample material for Jonson to explore the possibilities for deceit in his comedy.

In *The Alchemist*, the satire directed against Puritans poses a different set of problems for an analysis of Jonson's practice of deceit. Ananias is, at least initially, a reluctant gull and this circumstance creates a conflict between him and Subtle. Most interesting for this discussion is the ground upon which this conflict is presented. Ananias and Subtle bicker over language. Their conflict is a collision between two specific jargons or discourses, neither of which is understandable or acceptable to the other. Each refuses to recognize the validity and representational power of the opposing language and their dialogue represents an instance of non-communication. In their first meeting, Subtle informs Ananias that no "*terra damnata*" may "have entrance" for fear of contaminating "the work" (II, v, 5-6). Ananias declares that he is a "faithful brother", but the verbal assault of alchemical jargon with which Subtle tests Ananias' knowledge of the "faith" indicates that they do not share the same belief system:

> Can you sublime and dulcify? calcine?
> Know you the sapor pontic? sapor stiptic?
> Or what is homogene, or heterogene? (II, v, 9-11)

Ananias' response, "I understand no heathen language" (II, v, 12), and his naming of alchemical terminology as "heathen Greek" (II, iv, 17), sets the focus of their debate. It is a confrontation between two ideologies and the language which represents them: the discourse of a science and religious belief, each of which claims to embody a superior form of truth. Ananias considers Subtle to be a heathen who

"speaks the language of Canaan" (III, ii, 6) and is, therefore, both repugnant and dismissable. He believes Subtle's art to be "a work of darkness,/And with philosophy blinds the eyes of man." (III, ii, 9-10) Subtle mocks the naming practices of the Puritans; once in possession of the philosopher's stone they will not have to call themselves

> By names of Tribulation, Persecution,
> Restraint, Long-patience, and such like, affected
> By the whole family or wood of you,
> Only for glory, and to catch the ear
> Of the disciple. (III, ii, 93-97)

Subtle criticizes the Puritans for the motives behind the creation of their particular language, accusing them of possessing a jargon which is designed to mislead the unwitting "disciple" and capture glory for themselves. This criticism is similar to Surly's charge that alchemical "terms" obfuscate meaning and are designed to deceive. Tribulation, like Subtle, defends the language of his sect - it has been "invented" for the "propagation of the glorious cause". (III, ii, 98-9) The difference between their two positions lies in the stated purpose behind the creation of a particular discourse, for Subtle, we might recall, defends alchemical terminology on the grounds that alchemy is a secret science, to be known and practiced only by an elite. In any case, Subtle dismisses all faiths but his own: "O, but the stone, all's idle to it" (III, v, 102). Despite, however, the antagonism between these two faiths or ideologies, Jonson wittily points out that they share common ground. Both the Puritans and Subtle are creators and

readers of signs. Subtle invents for Abel Drugger a bogus hieroglyphic to enhance the success of his business, as well as providing a metoposcopic reading of his face; Ananias sees the "visible mark of the beast" in Subtle's forehead (III, ii, 8).

At this point we might ask, then, how do the rogues gull the Puritans? Alchemical language has no power to deceive them because they are armed with their own rhetoric. Ambition and a desire for political power motivate the Puritans - they require money to bribe civil magistrates "For the restoring of the silenced saints" (III, ii, 38). Tribulation, who does give credit to the science of alchemy and the benefits of the stone is, therefore, only too willing to overlook the gulf that Ananias believes divides the Puritans from heathen alchemists, and Subtle, by threatening to stop the "work" is able to secure their gulling:

> This will fetch 'em,
> And make them haste towards their gulling more.
> A man must deal like a rough nurse, and fright
> Those that are froward, to an appetite. (II, v, 87-90)

Subtle does not use the persuasive power of his rhetoric to dupe the Puritans as he does with Sir Epicure Mammon. He and the Puritans are firmly located within separate jargons so that even the ability to communicate at all, including deceptive forms of communication, becomes difficult. However, Jonson's satire of the Puritans is such that Subtle needn't worry; they, like all the dupes, have no ability to critically evaluate Subtle and his partners. Their

ambition motivates them to be complicit in the deception that is passed upon them. However, that language plays a lesser role in their gulling does not diminish the fact that language is still a major issue in the role the Puritans play in the drama. Puritan jargon acts as a means of characterization and as a vehicle for satire, but it also, once again, calls attention to Jonson's self-conscious examination of how verbal sign systems, specifically the jargon of a particular sect or discipline, function.

CHAPTER THREE

In *Discoveries* we find Jonson's most direct statements, usually denouncements, of lying. His conception of deceit typically involves a discrepancy between surface and depth, usually conceptualized as a false exterior which conceals an underlying truth or original. Thus, he is contemptuous of those "who are always kempt and perfumed; and every day smell of the tailor" (*Discoveries* 1751-2), and condemns those who "hide their ulcers within, their pride, lust, envy, ill nature, with all the art and authority they can" (*Discoveries* 1762-4). He is censorious of the human tendency to be ruled by the senses rather than the understanding, and compares our captivation with surfaces and gilt exteriors to childish pleasures:

> Like children, that esteem every trifle; and prefer a fairing before their fathers: what difference is between us and them, but that we are dearer fools, coxcombs, at a higher rate? They are pleased with cockleshells, whistles, hobby-horses, and such like: we with statues, marble pillars, pictures, gilded roofs, where underneath is lath, and lime; perhaps loam. (*Discoveries* 1780-7)

Jonson uses a tendency in human nature - the pursuit of money and the luxury that it brings - as a metaphor for misplaced value and self deceit: "all that we call happiness is mere painting and gilt: and all for money" (*Discoveries* 1790-1). Jonson also recognizes the relationship between this form of deceit, a kind of self-deception, and pleasure:

"we take pleasure in the lie, and are glad, we can cozen ourselves." (*Discoveries* 1788-9) Surly's accusation against Mammon that he willingly gulls himself can be seen in this context. The audience can sense the exuberant pleasure Mammon feels in his hedonistic fantasies of wealth, luxury and sexual encounters. Mammon, like Volpone, is self-obsessed, focussed solely on the satisfaction of his numerous desires. Given Jonson's seeming condemnation of this form of deceit and the type of gratification it brings, it is ironic that we find in his dramatic practice a method of employing deceit which connects lying and pleasure in a much different way, and reveals that Jonson's attitude towards the pleasure to be found in the lie is not so unambiguous as he leads us to believe in *Discoveries*. These two comedies, at least, celebrate the role of the artist and the pleasure of creating fiction itself.

The rogues in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* take great pleasure in their fraudulent practices, and relish the opportunities for deceit an exploitation of the signifying process provides for them. Up to this point, my discussion of Jonson's practice of deceit has concentrated on the possibilities for deceit intrinsic in the nature of the linguistic sign or the difficulty of communication when there is a refusal to recognize or agree on linguistic signs themselves, as in the case of the confrontation between alchemical and Puritan jargon. To move on, however, to address the relationship between deceit and pleasure, it

might be useful to turn to another form or aspect the con-game takes in these two gulling comedies. The pleasure of producing and observing, to use Volpone's phrase, "quick fiction" (III, v, 25), is a central theme in these two gulling comedies.

Volpone wishes to indulge his appetite for pleasure. He is a hedonist and is not motivated merely by the greed for wealth but by enjoyment of the way he gets it. It is his method of becoming rich - the deception of the gulls as it is carried out by the quick-witted Mosca - that delights him. "I glory/More in the cunning purchase of my wealth/Than in the glad possession" (I, i 30-32). He flourishes not through the common methods of trade, commerce, agriculture or industry but by taking advantage of the avarice and self-delusion of others. And he is not a miser; his purpose is not to hoard wealth but to enjoy both it and his genius: "What should I do,/But cocker up my genius, and live free/To all delights my fortune calls me to?" (I, i 70-72). Specifically, Volpone's pleasure is derived both from his role as audience to Mosca's dual role of poet or "artificer" and actor, and also from Volpone's own abilities as an author and actor. On stage, he hides himself so that he may observe and relish Mosca's clever arts of manipulation; in the mountebank episode and his scenes of mock illness, he participates directly in the creation of "quick fiction". When Volpone charges Mosca to "play the artificer...torture them rarely" (V, ii, 112), he

anticipates that Mosca will provide him with wonderful entertainment; but he is also identifying Mosca as an artist figure.

Jonson addresses the function of the "artificer" directly when he has Mosca speak upon his art. Mosca is the creative genius behind the gulling of the dupes; in a moment of self-praise he exclaims that he is no common parasite, and theorizes on his art and his brilliant practice of it. He is an example of

> your fine elegant rascal, that can rise,
> And stoop, almost together, like an arrow;
> Shoot through the air as nimbly as a star;
> Turn short as doth a swallow; and be here,
> And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;
> Present to any humour, all occasion;
> And change a visor, swifter than a thought!
> This is the creature had the art born with him;
> Toils not to learn it, but doth practise it
> Out of most excellent nature; and such sparks
> Are the true parasites, others but their zanies.
> (III, i, 23-33)

Mosca's talent is that of the artist; chameleon-like, he can adapt himself to whatever situation or "humour" necessary, can transform himself or "change a visor" to suit any occasion and is a *spontaneous* creator of "quick fiction". Thus he is able to manipulate both people and events and, very importantly, he can extricate himself and Volpone from unexpected difficulties such as Bonario's 'rescue' of Celia and the consequences which could follow from their exposure, or he can relieve Volpone from Lady Politic's incessant chatter with a story composed on the spot which takes her away in search of a philandering husband. Unlike Volpone, Dol, Face or Surly, he does not alter his identity in order

to deceive - he is always recognizably Mosca - but he is a master of fiction or the outright lie, can flatter, praise and use the power of suggestion to manipulate whomever he chooses, including Volpone himself. Mosca's delight in his creative abilities is palpable - one might consider him arrogant in his lavish self-praise - but neither can the audience resist the flair with which Mosca performs his craft as he effortlessly manipulates the gulls. When we compare Mosca (or even Volpone) with Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore, whose vices make them wholly repugnant, we inevitably have more sympathy for the rogues whose function it is to entertain us. The delight Mosca takes in his accomplishments, although ultimately self-delusory, is infectious; the audience is as pleased as Volpone is himself. Our complicity in the actions of the rogues is secured because our pleasure is tantamount to our approval.

As was emphasized in my discussion of Volpone's mountebank episode, the Fox himself is also adept at story-telling and using narrative as means of manipulating an audience. Volpone is a self- proclaimed consummate actor - not only can he play the "young Antinous" or Scoto of Mantua, he can convincingly play the role of a decrepit, dying old man to fool the dupes and the court. Volpone, too, is fascinated by his potential for creativity.

In his attempt to seduce Celia, not only does Volpone hold out a vision of wealth, luxury and the indulgence of every appetite, he explicitly links fiction with pleasure

when he endeavours to tempt her with the prospect of acting out tales from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, so that in "changed shapes" they may indulge in the thrill of disguise and transformation:

> Thou, like Europa now, and I like Jove,
> Then I like Mars, and thou like Erycine:
> So, of the rest, till we have quite run through,
> And wearied all the fables of the gods. (III, vii, 222-225)

Volpone is fascinated by this process of transformation because for him it holds out the possibility of endless variety and change, and it enables him to be an artist who creates fiction in the form of new identities. Through "changed shapes", Volpone hopes to transcend the fixed human personality and its constant, inevitable approach towards death. The pleasure of creation is, for him, the pleasure of creating unfixed meanings and identities. Like Jonson, he is exploiting the various possibilities for meaning inherent in signifying practice - each transformation or disguise he effects is, as a new identity, yet another sign and puts into motion another series of signification. That these new identities themselves are subject to interpretation or, more specifically, misinterpretation, is evidenced by Celia's response to Volpone's sudden transformation from a dying old man to an engaging and vigorous lover. In her refusal of his sexual advances, Celia utters key phrases which reveal ideas of masculinity which are in conflict with Volpone's own notions of

masculine prowess. Included in her rebuff is a rebuke that challenges Volpone's conception of manhood:

> If you have ears that will be pierced; or eyes
> That can be opened; a heart may be touched;
> Or any part that yet sounds man about you...
> Do me the grace to let me 'scape. (III, vii, 240-3)

And further: "Yet feed your wrath, sir, rather than your lust/(It is a vice comes nearer manliness)" (III, vii, 249-50). Celia is suggesting that Volpone's attempts to seduce her are unmanly because they are unchivalrous, unbefitting a gentleman and man of honour (which Volpone certainly is not). He, however, interprets her rejection as an insult which charges him with impotence. In fact, Volpone is rather quick to interpret her remarks thus and the audience senses that Celia has touched a nerve: "Think me cold,/Frozen and impotent, and so report me?/That I had Nestor's hernia, thou wouldst think." (III, vii, 261-3) We suspect that it is Volpone's fear of aging and its accompanying features of impotence, disease and death that prompts such an interpretation. So, despite his claim that he is

> As hot, as high, and in as jovial plight,
> As when, in that so celebrated scene,...
> [He] acted young Antinous...(III, vii, 159-162)

Celia does not interpret this latest performance as Volpone expects. His new identity signifies to her only the unmanliness of lust, and not the vigor and allure of Volpone in the role of lover.

For Volpone, the creative act of transformation, however, is not entirely an end in itself: when he and

Celia "transfuse" their "wandering souls/Out at [their] lips, and score up sums of pleasures" (III, vii, 234-5), Volpone hopes to overcome a kind of malaise or dissatisfaction. His is a wandering, restless, isolated soul: he has no family, no important human connections other than Mosca, a parasite and paid servant whose loyalty, Volpone comes to realize, cannot be counted on. While he takes delight in Mosca's talent for artifice and deception, he acknowledges no human ties: "I have no wife, no parent, child, ally,/To give my substance to; but whom I make/Must be my heir". (I, ii, 73-5) Volpone is explicit about his love of gold; he values it beyond human relationships as it transcends "All style of joy, in children, parents, friends,/Or any other waking dream on earth". (I, i, 17-18) Corvino is astute enough to inquire whether Volpone has any children that might hamper his inheritance of Volpone's fortune. Mosca describes Volpone's 'family':

> Bastards,
> Some dozen, or more, that he begot on beggars,
> Gipsies, and Jews, and blackmoors, when he was drunk.
> Knew you not that, sir: 'Tis the common fable.
> The dwarf, the fool, the eunuch, are all his;
> He's the true father of his family,
> In all, save me: but he has given them nothing. (I, v, 44-9)

Whether it be truth or "common fable" we don't know for sure, but Volpone's 'family', the individuals with whom he shares his home, are all freaks of nature, excepting Mosca who considers himself a paragon of natural creative ability. When Volpone reveals his identity to the court he does so

not only to keep Mosca from inheriting his entire fortune, but to prevent his parasite from acquiring a family:

> My ruins shall not come alone: your match
> I'll hinder sure: my substance shall not glue you,
> Nor screw you into a family. (V, xii, 86-8)

The 4th Advocate, during the trial, seeing an opportunity to further his own material interest, seeks a match between Mosca and his daughter. Given Volpone's own lack of either family or fellowship, and his complicity in turning husband against wife and father against son, such an outcome is unacceptable to him. Volpone's hedonism can be seen within this context. One suspects that the endless pursuit of pleasure, especially in the desire for variety and transformation, acts as a substitute for the lack of stable human relationships and ties which are stronger than those which can be had for money.

That Mosca's talent for "quick fiction" is no studied art but a result of natural ability brings to mind the prologue where the author claims to have written the play in only five weeks, "From his own hand, without a co-adjutor,/Novice, journey-man, or tutor." (17-18) Such a declaration invites the audience to identify or at least compare Mosca with the poet himself. In *The Alchemist*, the relationship or connection between the poet and rogue-artist is made more explicit. Renu Juneja argues that Jonson "saw in the alchemical doctrines a credible metaphor for the creative artist" (6), and attributes the difficulty of formulating a clear moral judgement of the rogues'

activities to Jonson's own "unresolved" attitude towards alchemy. Further, Juneja makes an explicit connection between Jonson's art and the alchemical process itself:

> "there was something of alchemy also in Jonson's art: as a satirist and a moralist he separated the good from the bad and sought to improve human nature. However critical he may have remained of the exaggerated claims of the alchemists, he must, nevertheless, have sensed the underlying harmony of his vision of his art and that of the alchemist. This latent sympathy, and it may well have been reluctant sympathy, explains the curious attractiveness of the rogues. (9)

This point, I think, is a difficult one to decide, for while it may be true that the alchemist is an artist, the moral status of such an artist is to be questioned. It is clear that in Subtle, we have an artist figure. The opening scene of *The Alchemist* has Face and Subtle arguing over who created whom. Subtle, as an alchemist, is also an artist who has the capacity to transform and create anew. In the manner of the alchemical process itself, he argues that he has transformed Face:

> Thou vermin, have I ta'en thee out of dung...
> Sublimed thee, and exalted thee, and fixed thee
> In the third region, called our state of grace? (I, i, 64-9)

In this instance, alchemy has become a metaphor for the kind of transformation that fascinates Volpone: the ability to alter one's identity, to exist in "changed shapes". According to Subtle, he has given Face a new identity, taking him "from brooms, and dust, and watering-pots" (I, i, 67). But to change identities, as the rogues repeatedly do

as a part of the con-game, is to perpetuate a fraud. So while Subtle seeks to be taken seriously as an artist, the declaration of his powers is also an admission of his dealings in deceptive practices.

Juneja finds reason to doubt that Jonson was completely skeptical of the pseudo-science of alchemy, pointing out that for Jonson's audience, alchemy was not the farfetched pursuit a modern audience knows it to be. Only the opening scene, which establishes the fraudulent objectives of the "venture tripartite", would have made it clear to a contemporary audience that gulling was the agenda of the play. Otherwise "the audience is likely to have experienced the mixed sensation of actually believing in the possibility of miracles claimed even as it recognized the fraud in this instance." (Juneja, 6) But it is also clear that Jonson satirizes alchemy's pretensions. It is the alchemists' claim of the ability to generate living forms which brings down Mercury's invective against them in *Mercury Vindicated*:

> ...would you believe it should be come to that height of impudence in mankind that such a nest of fire-worms as these are...should therefore with their heats called *Balnei*, *Cineris*, or horse-dung, profess to outwork the sun in virtue, and contend to the great act of generation, nay, almost creation? (93-100)

On the one hand, we have Subtle arguing to be taken seriously as an artist when he equates the alchemical process itself to art in its capacity as assistant to nature. It is not intended to be a usurper of nature's

prerogatives. In response to Surly's attack, Subtle argues that base metals are transformed into gold merely by speeding up a natural process and in doing so, alchemy is, in fact, an improvement upon nature's creative capacities. However, Mercury considers their "miracles in art" to be "treason against nature." (31) So, we ask, where is the poet in this debate? It is unlikely that Jonson tied his view of art and practice as an artist closely to that of the alchemist, whose 'art' is depicted in his works as fraudulent. Although the poet and rogue-artist are involved in a similar endeavour, both attempting to create transforming fictions, the poet is also in the privileged position of satirist and the importance of the critique which arises from this role should not be underestimated.

Although the lies of the rogues in *Volpone* threaten to "grow old", they never do; the conclusion Jonson's dupe-plots demand is the exposing of liars and imposters, following our enjoyment of their successful gulling of the dupes. It would appear that Jonson's gulling comedies exemplify Euripides' claim that truth is eternal, a lie cannot last. However, in both *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, Jonson makes the point that the success of falsehood, despite the many ways it can be facilitated through language and disguise, is ultimately dependent on particular, we might call them social, circumstances. In the two plays, the importance of the issue of human solidarity, whether a partnership or a "venture tripartite" is addressed and shown

to be a key ingredient to the success of the rogues. In *Volpone*, solidarity is presented as absolutely essential. Volpone and the rest represent a perverse and malignant display of human fellowship which, motivated by material self-interest and the need to protect their own reputations, has as its end the punishment of the innocent. Mosca asks: "Is the lie/Safely conveyed amongst us? is that sure?/Knows every man his burden?" (IV, iv, 3-5). Each individual is responsible for his part in the deception of the court. They must present a united front and leave no gaps where the truth might show through and expose the lie. This is entirely possible because truth and lies are dialectically related, each recognizable only in the face of the other.

The relationship between Volpone as master and Mosca as servant demonstrates the success possible when two individuals work jointly in achieving a single interest, and the consequences when this relationship proves to be unstable. Mosca's role is to satisfy his master's appetite for amusement. He is able to anticipate Volpone's desires, encourage them and arrange that they are satisfied. But Mosca is also capable of exploiting certain psychological tendencies in those he intends to deceive, and this extends to Volpone himself. In his position as provider of his master's entertainment, Mosca is situated to manipulate Volpone because he knows where Volpone is vulnerable and can turn this to his own advantage. Indeed, Mosca demonstrates considerable subtlety and art in doing so. The incident

involving Volpone's desire for Celia is a primary example. Mosca subtly plants the image of the beautiful Celia in Volpone's mind. The two are conversing about Lady Would-be, observing that she is too unattractive to be "dishonest" when Mosca casually says "But had she Signor Corvino's wife's face---" (I, v 106). Volpone immediately replies, "Has she so rare a face?" (I, v, 107). Mosca then develops his strategy first by feeding Volpone's curiosity about Celia's beauty: "The blazing star of Italy! a wench/Of the first year! a beauty ripe as harvest!" (I, v, 108-110). Cunningly he describes the impossibility of getting near her: "There is a guard of ten spies thick upon her" (I, v, 123) which serves to provoke Volpone into an absolute determination to see her. Mosca then suggests the means, "In some disguise, then" (I, v, 128). The progress of this exchange displays the subtle art Mosca will use throughout the play to manipulate his superiors, but significantly, it is also likely that Mosca has deliberately tempted his master. When Volpone has become obsessed with Celia and declares to Mosca:

> take my keyes,
> Gold, plate, and jewells, all's at thy devotion;
> Employ them, how thou wilt; nay, coyne me, too:
> So thou, in this, but crowne my longings (II, iv, 21-24)

he signals a shift in this master/servant relationship which Mosca has deliberately executed (Barton, 116). The audience has always known that Mosca is in control of the deception of the dupes, but now it appears he is in a position to

control Volpone as well. However, to Volpone, Mosca is a trusted servant, devoted to promoting the pleasures and ambitions of his master. The rigidity of the master/servant structure makes it unlikely that Volpone would suspect Mosca of being self-interested, but Mosca also has the ability to make himself appear completely trustworthy to those he deceives.

When we examine how Volpone and the rest are finally exposed, for they come very close to concluding their purpose successfully, we realize that it is the lack of solidarity between Volpone and Mosca which ultimately results in their downfall. Mosca is indeed self-interested, demonstrating a greed equal to anyone's. He is not content with half of Volpone's fortune, and their failure to come to an agreement ruins them both. When we look at their relationship, it is little wonder. In return for his flattery, obsequy and his genius for strategy and "quick fiction", Mosca is paid: "Hold thee, Mosca,/Take of my hand; though strik'st on truth in all,/And they are envious term thee parasite" (I, ii, 15-17). Anne Barton attributes their downfall to a "mutual violation of trust" (105), but she also refers to their relationship as a "partnership". This may be true, but it is not an equal partnership. The hierarchy of power inherent in the master/servant relationship seems inevitably to lead to Mosca's betrayal of Volpone. Although Mosca does not explicitly express any dissatisfaction with his social situation, we can, I

believe, take seriously his complaint to Bonario that, as a parasite, he is rendered contemptible and dependent, while simultaneously seeing his lament as yet another manipulative strategy. In any case, he is clever enough to ensure that Volpone perceives no threat from him and in doing so, is able to manoeuvre himself into a position to usurp Volpone's privileged social status. He continually reassures Volpone that his parasite merely follows his directions, when in fact Mosca is in control of the action of the drama.

Truth eventually does prevail and the innocent Bonario and Celia are released and exonerated. Despite this, however, *Volpone* is a dark and cynical comedy, not only because of the extremity of vice and corruption which permeates this Venetian society, nor because of the harshness of the punishments which are meted out to Volpone and Mosca, but also because the revelation of truth is almost accidental. As Anne Barton points out, the audience is intended to perceive the conviction of Celia and Bonario as an entirely possible ending for the play. Although the scheme of exploiting the greed of legacy-hunters appears improbable, "there is no practical reason why it should not continue to flourish" (115). While Jonson overturns Volpone and Mosca's success, "he makes it clear that the second ending is accidental, something which might have been indefinitely postponed" (115). It is perhaps a rather cynical conclusion to this satire. Essentially, Jonson is stating that it is not justice, secular or divine, (which

Celia trusts to) which separates the truth from the lie and uncovers the treachery; it is Volpone and Mosca's failure to stick together. Lacking any bond of loyalty or human fellowship, they effect each other's demise. The secular court, manipulated by a clever lawyer and parasite, and with at least one member blinded by his own interest, fails in the task of distinguishing between truth and fiction. Not only are individuals duped in this play, but the entire judicial system is subverted. Despite his ideals concerning language and truth, Jonson recognizes that truth is not necessarily "immortal". In fact, deception has at least an equal chance of success. Language itself is neutral on the subject of truth and deceit - it can be used to serve either end, as Voltore and Scoto's rhetoric clearly demonstrates. Contrary to what Jonson wished to believe, language is not allied to knowledge in any intrinsic way - it is absolutely flexible and as *Volpone* clearly demonstrates, lies do "grow old" if the correct circumstances are created.

In *The Alchemist*, the fraud must also come to an end and although Surly is instrumental in bring the con-game to a halt, the audience is not invited to perceive Surly as a champion of truth and honesty. We must remember that he is a gambler and is therefore, like Mammon, in a position to be cozened. This he freely admits, but this admission merely indicates that of the two, cards or alchemy, he prefers to participate in one con-game over another. As his name suggests, his role is also to spoil the fun when he exposes

the rogues, but furthermore, Surly himself is complicit in the deceitful practices of this comedy. When he dons his Spanish disguise in order to entrap Subtle, Face and Dol, he surrenders any moral authority he had to condemn their fraudulent arts. And as in *Volpone*, the opening scene of the comedy shows to the audience how tenuous a partnership in deceit actually is. The quarrel for primacy between Face and Subtle, as Dol insists they realize, threatens to expose them all. They must work together equally in a "venture tripartite" (I, i, 135) or they will be their "own destructions". (I, i, 104) Self-interest has no place in a successful confederacy of rogues.

Despite Jonson's austere moral sanctions against lying, his comedies celebrate "craft" and the making of fiction. We, as the audience, are in the position of Lovewit: free to take delight in Face's witty machinations while excusing him from blame and retribution. Obviously, Jonson was not averse to using deceit as a driving force behind his comedy, employing the dupe-plot structure as a vehicle for his satire and laughter while commenting wittily on human vice and folly. As he says, "we take pleasure in the lie." A dialogue in *Epicoene* puts into focus the two points of view we find in Jonson's gulling comedies. Clerimont and Truewit argue the merits and demerits of the feminine habit of face-painting and the various other ways women improve on 'nature'. Clerimont has composed a song where he praises "simplicity" and "sweet neglect", and condemns the

"adulteries of art". Truewit, who loves "a good dressing", takes the opposite position: when a woman adorns and augments her appearance with "art", then she "may vary every hour, take often counsel of her glass, and choose the best" (I, ii). Truewit favours creative variety, much as Volpone does. Clerimont on the other hand values an unchanging, constant original that cannot deceive the viewer. While the argument avoids serious moral reflections or judgements and deals primarily with the personal preferences or pleasures of the two men, it sets up a basic opposition which can be found in Jonson's work. Clerimont represents the moral sanction against lying which pervades *Discoveries*. Adulterated forms, including language, which diverge from simplicity are, Jonson concludes, intended to obscure and hide defects which lie underneath. Truewit, as his name suggests, has a more relaxed attitude. The visual pleasure he takes in observing an effective artifice, a good lie, makes him one who appreciates the fundamentals of artistic endeavour. The scorn with which Jonson treats deceptive practices in *Discoveries* on the one hand and his use of deceit as a source of amusement in his gulling comedies, bespeaks an uneasiness or ambiguity regarding the line between outright fraud, and the type of deception to be found in the act of creating effective fiction, so often indistinguishable from creating successful lies. To indulge in the "adulteries of art" is essentially to deceive the viewer by hiding a 'real' or 'true' nature. Such a false

exterior makes it virtually impossible for the observer to discern the truth with any degree of certainty, and it is this lack of certainty which Jonson finds troublesome and in some cases, dangerous. Hence, his struggle to create certain and fixed meanings in his linguistic practice. Yet in his role as "artificer" the poet also engages in the "adulteries of art". While the poet's business may be to create lies, there is an agreement between author and audience to accept this feature of artistic endeavour for their mutual pleasure.

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