

**JONSON AND THE ALCHEMICAL ECONOMY OF
DESIRE: CREATION, DEFACEMENT AND
CASTRATION IN *THE ALCHEMIST***

“O, my voluptuous mind! I am justly punished.”
The Alchemist, IV.5.82

In his analysis of Ben Jonson, Edmund Wilson diagnoses Jonson as “morose” and William Kerrigan, in an intriguing study, creates a portrait of the artist as a melancholic.¹ Both these critics take what might be called a sinister approach to Jonson. In so doing, they offer a perspective on the author largely ignored by the majority of Jonson scholars, but which could serve to renovate studies of the poet.²

Wilson’s attempt to understand the psychological sources of Jonson’s literary production from a Freudian standpoint led him to identify Jonson as an obsessive anal-erotic. Though not perhaps his most remarkable piece of criticism, Wilson’s essay owes its notoriety to his temerity in opposing the pervasive image of Jonson as a “virtuous” and “ethical” writer. William Kerrigan similarly re-evaluates this conventional image of Jonson in his essay, which Harold Bloom describes thus: “dissenting from our modern portrait of Jonson as sane and virtuous, [it] returns us to the reality of the poet’s abiding melancholy...”³ The image of the “centred”, “stoic” and “sane” poet has blinded critics to a darker side of Jonson’s poetics. An approach along the lines offered by Wilson and Kerrigan may be necessary to uncover another level of the Jonsonian text, invisible up to this point to the interpretative eye. In addition, the almost legendary *persona* of the convivial and public author compounds the problem since it is still the habit of many scholars to interpret the Jonsonian text through this preconceived image of Jonson the man. Perhaps

this is what T.S.Eliot meant when he concluded that Jonson was the most famous author never to have been read.⁴

Behind the traditional image of Jonson the writer and judge lie traces of a morbid fear concerning the ultimate fate of the poet's own creation and name. The fear that his works will be *defaced* and his name *erased* serves as a catalyst for Jonson's extra-literary productions such as prefaces, citations from antiquity, marginalia, and other additions to an "original" text. The ultimate expression of the fear of literary oblivion is Jonson's publication in 1616 of a monumental Folio edition of his collected works.⁵ The possibility of being denied due fame and not inheriting one's rightful literary posterity drives literary production in specific ways; literary creation must be prepared in advance to withstand the imminent danger of defacement and erasure. The shadow of defacement particularly informs the Jonsonian attitude towards the act of creation and permeates the themes of his works. *The Alchemist* and other writings reveal traces of a compulsion to ensure that creation endures and is neither defaced by the gaze of a reader nor consumed in the cyclical movement toward novelty. As will become clear later, in *The Alchemist* this fear of the defacement of the literary text is represented as a form of symbolic castration at the hand of the father.

A mistrust of theatrical performance's ephemerality fuels a drive to generate a durable text that is immune to the corruption of a critical or envious gaze. Part of Jonson's prophylactic strategy involves borrowing, even plagiarism, from already established literary sources in order to authorize and secure within an acknowledged tradition his new and original work. The scene of Catiline's death in the final lines of the eponymous play is a word-for-word translation of an episode from Claudian's *Gigantomachia*, in which the rebellious giants are turned to stone by the Olympian Minerva holding aloft the head of Medusa. The masque texts constantly revert to citations from classical authors in their margins. Jonson's culling of ancient fragments to justify his work may be said to hark back to a scholastic tradition. However, some aspects of Jonson's defensive strategies appear more post-modern than most post-modernist writing. For instance, groups of spectators comment between the acts in a number of Jonson's plays; repetitive scenes of spying, in which one or more characters in a scene comment on the action unfolding before them, often in asides, are smaller versions of these "choral" commentators. The extent to which a Jonson play is seen and commented upon by one or more characters is unmatched in Shakespearean drama or any other later Jacobean drama. Adam Overdo, the judge in *Bartholomew Fair*, moves about the Fair in a disguise for the purpose of finding out "enormities". The disguised "judge" performs the editorial function of the self-censuring author. The text, in other words, incorporates within itself commentary upon itself, anticipating future condemnation of the author's work and thereby fending it off in advance. The monstrous enormities of *Bartholomew Fair* are referred to as such within the

text of the play; the censure of the reader upon reading the monstrous text is warded off by the inclusion of the judging eye (in a parodic and clownish form) within the unfolding of the play, which thus reads itself before being read by the reader.

One way in which the Jonsonian text conceals within itself defences against defacement may be seen in Surly's interventions in *The Alchemist*. Surly's critical stance toward the alchemical dream-world of Epicure Mammon and Subtle's highfalutin alchemical gibberish should not be reduced to an expression of the view-point of Ben Jonson, stern critic of alchemy and the swindling confidence-men the art had produced. Rather, Surly's interruptive critiques and asides should be seen as part of an intricate system of authorial auto-censure; the voice of Surly becomes a form of apotropaic authorial critique:

[Enter Face.]
Subtle. How now! what colour says it?
Face. The ground black, sir.
Mammon. That's your crow's head?
Surly. Your cockscomb's, is't not?
Subtle. No, 'tis not perfect. Would it were the crow.
 That work wants something.
Surly. [Aside.] O, I looked for this.
 The hay is a-pitching.—

(II.3.67-71)

This textual incorporation of a critique of alchemy serves to pre-empt the possibly destructive censure the author feels awaits his creation in the outside world, that is to say his audience and future readers, the barbarians to whom he fears to entrust his works. A certain danger exists for the writer with classical aspirations in choosing alchemy as a subject. The highly scatological language of alchemy exerts a strong fascination for the poet: "your broths, your menstrues, and materials / Of piss, and egg-shells, women's terms, man's blood, / Hair o' the head, burnt clouts, chalk, merds, and clay..." (II.3.193-95) In the mouth of the critic Surly, these lines represent both an authorial indulgence in monstrous language and a critique of it at the same time.

The desire to control critical reception of his works and guarantee the terms of his own posterity manifests itself in Jonson's works most conspicuously in the dialectic between *performance* and *text*, between the ephemeral and the lasting.⁶ In Jonson's anxious stance towards creation, as soon as the authorial word receives pneumatic life from the actor on the stage, it begins to decay. In many of Jonson's writings, the Jacobean court masque serves as the ultimate symbol of the swift transition from birth to death which marks performance: the *birth* of the masque being separated from its *death* by

only a few moments. Masques “vanish all away in a day” (*Discoveries*, VIII, 1741); they are “the short bravery of the night” (“To Sir Robert Wroth”, VIII, 10).⁷ Inigo Jones, the Stuart court architect and designer of the visual and most ephemeral part of the masque, is one of Jonson’s favourite metonyms for the metamorphic and instant erasure of the masque after performance. One of the passages which attests most poignantly to the inherent ephemerality of the masque for a writer concerned with preserving his name in the future is the preface to *The Masque of Blacknesse*. In this short apology for the poet’s published account of a one-night court performance, the author discloses the fundamental forces lying at the heart of his creative enterprise; he names envy and ignorance as the chief culprits possessing the power to deface and efface literary creation:

The honor and splendor of these spectacles was such in the performance, as could those houres have lasted, this of mine, now, had been a most unprofitable worke. But [...] little had been done to the studie of magnificence in these, if presently with the rage of the people, who (as a part of greatness) are priviledged by custome, to *deface* their carkasses the spirits had also perished [...] I adde this later hand, to redeeme them, as well from Ignorance, as Envie, two common evills, the one of *censure*, the other of *oblivion*.
(my italics, preface to *The Masque of Blacknesse*, VII, 169)⁸

The possible effacement by time and ignorance of the ephemeral piece of art (*oblivion*) and the threat of defacement as a result of envy (*censure*) act together as catalysts for additions and citations from classical authors and other literary fathers described as the author’s “later hand”. An exegesis of the original masque redeems what was lost, immortalizing the transient magnificence of the already bygone verbal and visual performance. By adding notes, comments and descriptions of what happened, bearing witness to the novelty of the masque, and at the same time justifying it with citations from authorized writers, the author turns the ephemerality of a light and splendid performance to the profit of his own fame.⁹ The masque performance’s illusory and transitory nature, in fact, provides an opening which the writer exploits to ensure his own posterity and fame: commentary, description and finally the publication of the collaborative effort in a volume of the author’s own work.

The Jonsonian obsession with the reception of his works and his fame, in other words, his own *literary inheritance*, may be seen reflected in the persistent theme of the struggle between fathers and sons over inheritance in the plays. The fear of the ephemeral and possible defacement of the writer’s work is captured in the struggle between a “father” alchemist, Subtle, and his apprentice “son”, Face, for claims to the illusory gains of the alchemical confidence game. *The Alchemist* traces the trajectory of this apprentice son, who throughout the play attempts to “save his face” from defacement by

finding new disguises and increasingly complicated tricks to keep the plot going without being caught in the act of creating a kind of illusory novelty behind the father's back. Face, the character, acts out the authorial fantasy of acquiring the virile power of the father, or literary antecedent, in order to avoid the effacement of his own plot, his own creation and name.¹⁰ In his dealings with various father figures, Face represents the Jonsonian desire to capture authorial identity from the literary father. This desire to earn an identity is displayed most revealingly in a phantasmatic scene in which Face attempts to steal the mantle of the literary father. This metaphoric mantle of literary authority is literally figured in *The Alchemist* by the cloak of Hieronimo in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Face both attempts to steal this playhouse cloak and symbol of authorial virility before using it as a bargaining tool with which to receive a portion of his inheritance and gain protection from the father from his own defacement.

Face, whose name is that of a blank, undefined visage, the symbol of the yet undefined and unauthorized self, is destined, in the course of a play of disguises, to grope for some kind of identity. Throughout *The Alchemist*, Face moves from one costume to another: from Captain Face, to Lungs, the alchemist's apprentice, to Jeremy, the butler, which the reader only discovers at the *end* of the play is the original identity of this character with multiple faces and no face. The play begins with Face's question to Subtle:

Why, who
Am I, my mongrel? Who am I? (I.1.13)

This question of his own identity is followed, a few lines later, by a scene in which Face fantasises about writing and publishing a book. Face not only imagines writing a book, he threatens to undo and thereby outdo Subtle by exposing the alchemist's confidence game and the alchemical theatre: "I will have / A *book*, but barely reckoning thy impostures, / Shall prove a *true* philosopher's stone to *printers*." (I.1.101-02) The theatrical and highly insubstantial performance of the swindling alchemist becomes material out of which Face will produce a printed book, a "true philosopher's stone", a book capable of creating inexhaustible wealth, which in literary, as well as alchemical terms, implies spiritual immortality for the maker of the "great work". The printing of the book may be seen as a means of capturing the "I" whose name is printed on the title-page of a book, the name representative of the kind of alchemist who transforms the metamorphic elements of theatre into an authorial philosopher's stone.

In *The Alchemist*, the struggle for self-identity and independence is interwoven with mutual dependence and even collaboration. The quarrel between Subtle and Face, concerning the authorship of their alchemical confidence game, appears at first as one between two partners in a common

between father and son, where the son seeks a separate identity and escape from the law of the father while at the same time forced to collaborate with him in order to save face and avoid “marring” their common plot.

In his search for this separate identity, Face runs the show and gives directions, acquiring a role as master of ceremonies and author of various scenes staged by the “venter tripartite”. He is an improviser of tricks based on swift words and quick disguises. His swiftness and mutability do not open up much in the way of new perspectives, but by adding more tricks, he keeps the plot going and his face *undefaced*, acting much as an avatar of the writer in his attempt to create novelty, while at the same time protecting his creation by striking the necessary bargains with literary fathers in the form of citation and quotation. The repetition of scenes between father figures and son figures fuels the plot until some general exhaustion brings about a new avatar of the original *family* model.

The basic familial structure of this play is reinforced by the role of female characters. In *The Alchemist*, as in almost all of Jonson’s other plays, women represent a coveted prize only in the context of rivalries between fathers and sons, not between men engaged in schemes to seduce young desirable women. Dol Common, a prostitute, and Dame Pliant, a widow, are the only two women of the play. The women, however, are characterised, not as outsiders, likely to be entered into dalliance with, but rather as family members. The widow is a “sister” and her “pliancy” testifies to her unsuitability, like the prostitute, as an object of romantic desire. Dol Common is often represented as a mother: “suckle him” and “tickle him with thy mother-tongue”. One of the exchanges, indicative of the nature of the rivalry between father and son in this play, concerns the quarrel about who will marry the widow, Dame Pliant, the sister of one of the gulls drawn into the alchemical confidence game. Because the widow hardly figures either as an object of desire or even as a character, she acts as a signifier for the struggle for ascendancy between father and son in the narrative. Yet, the quarrel over the widow may also be seen in terms of Jonson’s rejection of the romantic courtship plot perfected by his father and rival Shakespeare, in favour of a family romance focused on the particularly Jonsonian obsession with inheritance and identity. The exchange between Subtle and Face about who has rights to the widow begins in Act IV and dominates the rest of the play as the widow moves through the hands of one, then another, before finally ending up in the possession of the departed master of the house, Lovewit.

Both Subtle and Face are interested in acquiring the rich widow, who, as in *Bartholomew Fair*, represents gold. Face argues that Subtle is too *old* to take a wife; he disqualifies the father after stating clearly his will to obtain the woman:

Face. ...Thou art old, and canst not serve—
Subtle. Who? Cannot I? 'Slight, I will serve her with thee...
 (IV.3.9-11)

Subtle insists that he will not relinquish the position of the older man and the legitimacy of his possession of the woman: "I will not treat with thee; what, sell my fortune? / 'Tis better than my birthright." (IV.3.13-14) In the next scene, rivalry between the father and son is resolved, momentarily, in favour of Face. When Surly, disguised as a Spanish don, enters the house seeking the prostitute, the swindlers find themselves faced with exposure through a shortage: their one woman, the prostitute, the mother, is unavailable to play yet another role. The shortage of women within the family romance is a recurring source of conflict between the men. Eventually, the widow and "sister" fills the gap.

Indeed, it is Face who suggests using Dame Pliant to play the part of the prostitute for Surly, disguised as a Spanish don, in order to save the alchemical machinery of illusion from breaking apart. The widow is necessary to keep the theatre in motion and prevent Surly from exposing and defacing the conspirators' confidence game. Upon the suggestion that the widow be used in place of the prostitute, Subtle immediately gives up his rights to her: "Marry a whore? Fate, let me wed a witch first" (IV.3.90). Face, on the other hand, has no qualms about using the widow as a prostitute, since for him, the difference between a widow and prostitute is negligible:

It is but one man more,
 Which on's chance to have her; and beside,
 There is no *maidenhead* to be feared or lost.
 (IV.3.66-68)

The widow (the wife of a *departed father*) may be used for a double purpose with no fear or loss of maidenhead: she may serve to seal up the gap in their plot *and* he may marry her (money) at the same time. The woman with no maidenhead may be substituted easily within the larger framework of the plot to swindle other men. Prostitutes and widows are flexible to the needs of an author-director such as Face, unlike a virgin whose (encumbering) virginity, brings in its wake another plot, antithetical to Jonsonian drama. Virginity entails romance, marriage, the "star-crossed lovers" of Shakespearean drama.

The usefulness, to Face, of a widow or prostitute parallels the banishment of maidenhead from the authorial plot. This exclusion may be seen as symmetrically signifying the elimination of a potential for cuckoldry: in a world empty of chastity, the cuckold is redundant. The problem of cuckoldry is a persistent theme within the Jonsonian oeuvre. The cuckold, or the man in fear of being cuckolded, is a character who appears in many of Jonson's plays:

Kitely in *Every Man In His Humour*, Deliro in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Littlewit in *Bartholomew Fair*. This fascination with the cuckold and cuckoldry is directly linked to the Jonsonian fear of his ability to control the future critical reception of his work. The writer's inability to ultimately dictate the reception of his works mimics a father's inability to know if his son is truly his son. Jonson's preoccupation with chastity (or its symmetric opposite, prostitution) reflects the concern with laying claim to his own works in the future. To be able to "call his children his own" requires either perfect chastity, a rarity, or the pre-emptive elimination of the possibility of any dire consequences resulting from unruliness in woman: hence the authorial preference for female characters who have no virginity to be feared or lost.

The exclusion of maidenhead in Jonson's works may be read as a refusal to take on the romantic courtship plot, enabling the more obsessive competition between fathers and sons over inheritance and "shares" to occupy a primary place.¹³ The expulsion of maidenhead and the romantic courtship plot necessarily results in the expulsion of the other and of difference. What remain are kinship relations, not in need of being forged or created. The links delicately and poetically forged between strangers in a Shakespeare play (consider Desdemona's speech about how she fell in love with Othello, or the structuring of the casket scenes to create the narrative of the love between Portia and Bassanio) is totally alien to Jonson's world, where pre-existing and prefabricated relations (like the prefabricated languages and cants sent off like sparklers throughout the play) are manipulated and thrown into juxtaposition or eternal confrontation with each other.

The play may be seen, then, as a family romance with very little in common (except for parody) with the more standard romantic courtship plot, a plot which Jonson abandons very early on in his career after writing *The Case is Altered*. In fact, Jonson's strict adherence to the classical unities in *The Alchemist*, which takes place over the course of one day and in one house, only serves to reinforce the familial aspect of its plot. The play takes place in the house of the absent master and father, Lovewit. The house is the scene of the familial romance. No action takes place outside of it, and, particularly interestingly, the members of the outside world who come to the house become, themselves, members of the family. The absence of other polarities, in fact, the absence of difference, reinforces the centrality of the familial establishment.

In *The Alchemist*, sexual desire, the sign of differentiated relationship, instead of being exchanged between male and female characters of separate families, is exchanged between characters in positions as "kin". Sexual desire is parodied, but never circulated, never exchanged. Lust, for instance, is circumscribed in Epicure Mammon and inside a room. But this room is one of many in a family house and when Face secrets Dol Common and Mammon in

this room he must remind them not to be too loud for fear of being overheard by the father, Subtle:

Dol Common. O, but beware, sir! you may come to end
The remnant of your days in a loath'd prison,
By *speaking* of it.

Mammon. 'Tis no idle fear!
We'll therefore go with all, my girl, and live
In a free state...

[...]

and with these

Delicate meats set ourselves high for pleasure,
And take us down again, and then renew
Our youth and strength with drinking the elixir;
And so enjoy a perpetuity
Of life and lust...

[Enter Face.]

Face. Sir, you are too *loud*. I hear you, every word,
Into the laboratory. Some fitter place!
The garden, or great chamber above.

(IV.1.153-72)

The danger of being overheard through the (theatrical) partitions by the figure of the father (Subtle) makes the conversation between Mammon and Dol Common a potential inverted primal scene in which desire is linked even to an adolescent guilt and the fear of being caught *in the act* as if they were children. Desire and sexual guilt, materialise, symmetrically, in relation to the familial alchemical work. The family and work circle around the hearth of the alchemical furnace. The alchemical activity of Subtle and Face substitutes itself for the old plot of desire to the extent of parodying the loss of maidenhead:

*Mammon...*This day thou shalt have ingots, and tomorrow
Give lords th'affront. Is it, my Zephyrus, right?
Blushes the bolt's head?

Face. Like a *wench* with child, sir,
That were but now discovered to her *master*.

(II.2.7-10)

The alchemical stage of the red "bolt's head", is compared to the sexual guilt accompanying the loss of virginity. The alchemical work substitutes itself for all aspects of the circulation of desire and places them into a specifically familial setting: emphasising relations between children and parents (masters and servants), and sexual guilt as opposed to desire.

With the elixir, that shall be as tough
 As Hercules', to encounter fifty a night
 [...]
 I will have all my beds blown up, not stuffed:
 Down is too hard. And then mine oval room
 Filled with such pictures as Tiberius took
 From Elephantis, and dull Aretine
 But coldly imitated. Then, my glasses
 Cut into more subtle angles, to disperse
 And multiply the figures as I walk
 Naked between my succubae.
 (II.2.34-38; 41-48)

In *The Alchemist*, virginity, desire and all the other elements of the romance plot are exaggerated through the sexualised language of alchemy, and substituted for by the alchemical works and its asexual generativity, which is controlled and manipulated by an alchemist and his apprentice. Similarly, Dol Common and Dame Pliant, the female family members, act as signifiers of the paternal and filial relationships in the play. The œdipal nature of Subtle and Face's bartering of the widow, who is first captured by the son from the father only to be returned to Lovewit, the original father and master of the house, in exchange for saving his "face" is evident. Face's bartering of the widow between Subtle and Lovewit may be seen in general terms as the son's desire to capture the mother from the father, only to be forced to give her up. The son's return of the "mother" to the father may be interpreted as acceptance of the paternal hierarchy to prevent castration at the hands of the father, which, in the case of Face, means defacement.

Face's victory over the father in both gaining the widow and keeping the alchemical theatre in motion is temporary. Although he has overcome Subtle, the substitute father, he must eventually cede the widow to Lovewit, the *returning* father, in order to obtain pardon for attempting to capture the widow for himself. Use of the widow to save the son's plot from defacement entails a symbolic return to the father and a debt that must be paid. The *widow* is returned to the *widower*, passing through the hands of the son, her trajectory taking her around and back to the father.

If the handing back of the widow to the father is conceived in literary terms, then in the Jonsonian phantasmagoria, the debt to the father takes the form of a literary citation, the literal use of Hieronimo's cloak from *The Spanish Tragedy*. Jonson's relationship to this play merits attention. Jonson often refers to Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* in his works, and more particularly to the "cloak" of Hieronimo, which characters in his plays often consider using as a disguise. Jonson also referred to Kyd's tragedy as a kind of by-word for that which was old-fashioned in Renaissance drama. In his Induction to

Bartholomew Fair, he identifies as fairly staid those in the audience who “swear Jeronimo or Andronicus are the best plays, yet, [he] shall pass unexcepted at here as a man whose judgement shews it is constant, and hath stood still these five and twenty or thirty years...” In this remark concerning both Kyd and Shakespeare lies an uneasiness concerning the continuing success of the fathers’ plays. The phenomenal success of *The Spanish Tragedy* is highlighted even more when one considers that Jonson was commissioned to renovate this very popular drama by writing additions to the play. Moreover, *The Spanish Tragedy* is a sort of “fathering” play itself: other playwrights, such as Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, drew upon this play for their own work. References to Kyd’s tragedy in *The Alchemist* highlight Jonson’s own renewal of the drama, for Face’s original name, *Jeremy*, may well be an Anglicisation of *Hieronimo*. Even more striking is the fact that Jonson’s one major role as a young actor was the part of Hieronimo, the mad *father*. Jonson himself may be said to have literally donned the mantle of the father, the cloak of Hieronimo, at a very early stage of his dramatic career. Under the mantle of Hieronimo, the son will attempt to capture the “widow” and, so doing, the father’s virile power; it is through the return of the mantle, the fragmentary citation, that the father will acquire, once again the symbol of his own virility, the eternally exchangeable and inheritable plot (the maidenheadless plot, never unique, nor circumscribed unto one man, but handed down generations of literary fathers and sons).

Although Face has claimed that his relative youth will enable him to “serve” the widow, he needs a Spanish disguise, i.e. the talisman of virility, to help him “win” her. In terms of the plot, the reason Face needs to dress up like a Spaniard is simple: the widow has been gulled by Face and Subtle into believing that her fortune and destiny is to marry a Spanish don, therefore she can only be won if the wooer appears in Spanish dress. Surly dresses up as a Spaniard in order to rescue the widow from dishonour and is fittingly shouted out of the house by Kastril, Dame Pliant’s brother, who accuses Surly of being: “a pimp and a trig, / And an Amadis of Gaul, or a Don Quixote” (IV.7.39-40). Not only is this kind of juxtaposition of low cant and high culture typical of Jonson’s own creative strategy, the quotation conceals a reference to a pair of father and son texts, since Cervantes’ knight modelled himself upon the adventures *he had read* in *Amadis of Gaul*. Later, Face promises Drugger that if he acquires a Spanish costume, he will be allowed to win the widow, but Face has plans to steal the disguise away from Drugger and use it to get the widow for himself. In order to supply himself with the costume, Face turns to a theatrical prop. The mention of *The Spanish Tragedy* signals a particularly meta-theatrical moment in the play:

Face. Thou must borrow
A Spanish suit. Hast thou no credit with the players?

Drugger. Yes, sir; did you never see me play the Fool?
Face. I know not, Nab. [*Aside*] Thou shalt, if I can help it.—
 Hieronimo's *old cloak, ruff, and hat* will serve;
 I'll tell thee more when thou bring'st 'em.
 (IV.7. 69-72)

The accoutrements and talismanic objects of the father – cloak, ruff, and hat – may “serve” the son; they are also supposed to enable the son to “serve” the widow as he boasted he would do. Although he prepares to wear yet another disguise (having changed already from butler, to captain, to an alchemist's assistant) Face never has a chance to *don* it. The “old cloak” of the father, in the seminal play of the time, operates as the father's virile garb, which circulates among a number of the characters (Surly, Drugger, Face) before finding its way back to the father, the master of the house, upon his return. The cloak is never readily available. It is always at one remove, just as it eventually slips away from the sons. This remove partakes of the perpetual movement of mimesis, the theatrical signifier endlessly chasing itself. What is more, another layer of mimesis is visible if one considers the origin of the cloak. Hieronimo's cloak is imported into *The Alchemist* via an actor and fool named Drugger. Interestingly, scholarship has shown that “Fool” is a *double entendre* as it refers not only to the character in *The Alchemist*, but also to the actor Robert Armin, who played Drugger and who always played the jester for the theatrical company, The King's Men. The referential system leaps from the world of continuous artifice to that of biographical fact. The screen of mimesis has no lining, no other side, it points at itself or dissolves at the intrusion of an objective reality.

Face pays a heavy price for escaping exposure as a fraud. In order to receive sanctuary from the symbolic Law, represented by Lovewit, the returning father, he must relinquish the cloak to the father. This compromise ending to the play contains an analogue to the fatal price which the author pays in exchange for sanctuary among the authorities he cites and among whom he hopes to take a lasting and secure place. To prevent his text from being defaced, he necessarily pays a price for the creative act, remaining, like Face, a son to the father and master of the literary house. When Lovewit returns to London and his house after having fled because of the plague, the actors clear the stage of all but the indelible traces of the alchemical and theatrical illusion. These traces, “[T]he ceiling filled with *poesies* of the candle / And Madame with a dildo *writ* o' the walls” (V.5.41-42), are highly symbolic within the play. A symbol of penetration, the dildo, is ambiguously both the symbol of artificial sexual intercourse (not unlike a version of sexual generation within a limbeck) as well as a writing instrument. The son must pay the price of having “abused” the master's house during his absence. This abuse is only evident in a

post-scriptum found by the father upon his return, the sexually explicit graffiti defacing the master's house or the master text:

Face. Give me but leave to make the best of my fortune,
 And only pardon me th' *abuse* of your house:
 It's all I beg. I'll help you to a widow,
 In recompense, that you shall gi' me thanks for,
 Will make you seven years younger, and a rich one.
 'Tis but your putting on a Spanish cloak.
 (V.3.82-87)

The necessity of *returning* the father's mantle to the father is the price which Jonson, like *Face*, must pay to avoid defacement. The cloak provides a figuration for the settlement of the matter of castration, that is to say the inability to write in the shadow of the father or the fatherly text. The threat of castration is lifted once the son gives up the attempt to replace the father in the mother's affections. Indeed, he surrenders the talisman of virility and restores the father's youth. This gift of rejuvenation parallels the alchemical reward. Perhaps it is at this metaphoric nexus that *The Alchemist* can be best apprehended. Indeed, the promise held out by the alchemical endeavour in the play has to do with alchemy as a cure for disease, restorer of youth and promiser of immortality. Alchemy, insofar as it provides the overarching metaphor for a conflictual economy of desire where the old and the new strive to dispossess one another or reach a negotiated settlement, acts as a rich metaphor for the author's anxiety about originary creation, about authority and posterity. The problem of growing old and the promise of rejuvenation are intimately linked to the authorial desire for control over a work in order to preserve it from the decay of Time, or the malady of misreading.

The Alchemist presents the reader with a figuration of the authorial process itself, enacted in a rivalry between father and son and in the settlement struck between *Face* and *Lovewit*. *Lovewit*, having temporarily vacated the mausoleum of literary tradition, makes it possible for the literary son to engage in his own plotting. The absence of the literary father allows momentary novelty, revised by his inescapable (and desired) return. The literary mantle, stolen from the theatre by a fool, is returned to the father in the form of a citation in the son's "work". In its relentless self-referentiality, and nesting layers of artifice, the play enacts a regression into the womb as in Jonson's "Cary-Morison Ode". The infant of the poem turns away from the prospect of Hannibal's "rage" (not unlike the defacing "rage" of the people who tore down masque sets) by re-entering the womb of its mother. This image, taken directly out of Pliny's descriptions of monstrous births, testifies to the dilemma of an artist faced with the necessity of creation and the fear of producing monstrosity:

Brave infant of Saguntum, clear
 Thy coming forth in that great year
 When the prodigious Hannibal did crown
 His *rage*, with *razing* your immortal town.
 Thou looking then about,
 Ere thou wert half got out,
 Wise child, didst hastily return,
 And mad'st thy mother's womb thine urn.
 ("To The Immortal Memory and Friendship of That Noble Pair,
 Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison," 1-8)

The self-aborting infant, who as such, may be seen as monstrous, conveys the image of a literary imagination which leaps to its own posterity in the very moment of its conception. Such a juxtaposition of birth and death testifies to a desire for immediate posterity and a rejection of the creative burden of birth. The threat of defacement, of "razing", ironically, enables the town of Saguntum to be "raised" and immortalised. Since the babe's coming forth, and subsequent burial, is intimately linked with the historically gigantic figure of Hannibal, the child and its town gain a kind of approximate fame. One may see in this small fragment of the poem a reflection of the authorial desire for fame and posterity: not through the long and wearying process of fabricating and building, but rather through the mingling and merging of the novel and the authoritative. The author "raises" a monument out of the symmetrical threat of having his name "razed". Furthermore, the citation from Pliny constitutes yet another layer of various authoritative figures and names which provide a womb-like lining for the new-born Jonsonian creation. In the poem, as in *The Alchemist*, the author may be said to conjure up the dead authorial figure in the hopes both of "clearing" his name and asking for the imprimatur of the father for the transgression of original creation, which is itself seen as the monstrosity of desire.

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NOTES

1. Edmund Wilson, "Morose Ben Jonson", *The Triple Thinkers*, rev. ed. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1938) and William Kerrigan, "Ben Jonson Full of Shame and Scorn", *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 6, 1 (April 1973), Georgia State University, Atlanta.
2. In the word "poet", I encompass the writer of the plays and masques as well as the poems. In this I may be said to follow Jonson's own idea of himself as a poet, a "maker". More importantly, I believe the term "poet" to be much better suited for a study of Jonson, and that separating the work of the "dramatist" from that of the "poet" has been an artificial distinction imposed by academic disciplines.
3. Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Interpretations: Ben Jonson* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987).
4. T. S. Eliot, *Elizabethan Dramatists* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934).

5. The difference between *effacement* and *defacement* may help to determine the gradations in the creator's fear concerning the future of his creation. Effacement refers to the inexorable and gradual obliteration and erasure of the text over time. The publication of a Folio edition of his collected works may be seen as an attempt by the author to address particularly the problem of *effacement*. Defacement, on the other hand, is a much more active disfiguring and marring of the text by an agent: in the case of Jonson's works, this active agent of defacement is perceived to be the envious gaze of the reader. The authorial interventions and extra-literary additions meant to defend the Jonsonian work address more specifically the problem of the possible *defacement* of the poet's text through misreading and misprision.
6. My emphasis on ephemerality should not be confused with Jonas Barish's idea of Jonson's "anti-theatricality", which, given a work like *The Alchemist*, is a theory which has serious shortcomings when applied to Jonson as opposed to Puritans for example. Barish, under the huge umbrella term of "anti-theatricality" simplifies and distorts a much more complex Jonsonian problematic concerning a fear of the defacement of an *ephemeral* text. Jonson wrote numerous masques; it is the masque's inherent *ephemerality*, not its inherent *theatricality*, which, for an author concerned with his own posterity, poses a serious threat.
7. All numbers within parentheses represent *line numbers* if the citation refers to a poem or to Jonson's *Discoveries*; they refer to act, scene and line numbers if the citation is from a play. Except for citations of *The Alchemist*, all citations of Jonson's works are to the volume number in the standard edition of C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, eds. *Ben Jonson*. Oxford, 1947. *The Alchemist*, Alvin Kernan, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). All references to *The Alchemist* are from this edition of the play.
8. Throughout this paper, all italicised words in quotations from Jonson's works are mine, for the purpose of emphasizing and highlighting words crucial to the argument.
9. The position of the writer who adds a "later hand" is a complicated and interesting one. The writer of the original masque script becomes, in a sense, the receptor of his own, and his collaborators', joint work. The author acts as reader (spectator) of the masque in rewriting, for the *future* reader, a testimony of what he *has seen* in addition to recovering the *sources* of his text. In this manner, the danger of the ephemerality of the masque is transformed by the poet into a means of accumulating profit from his and his collaborators' joint work.
10. I note here a difference between inheriting and acquiring. The first refers to the passive activity of waiting to be given one's inheritance, the other, more active, refers to when the heir apparent seeks to ensure his inheritance, receive it in advance, or lay hold of it without waiting for the father to give it, or, in the case of the author worried about defacement, without waiting for *time* to bestow it. In *Epicæne*, Morose's heir, fittingly named Dauphine, directs a theatrical tranvestism in order to acquire and ensure his inheritance. The links between *Epicæne* and *The Alchemist* begin in the connection between theatrical disguising, playmaking and acquiring an inheritance.
11. Their "common" venture, in fact, seems to be represented in the name of the prostitute they share, Dol Common. She is therefore not so much *something* the two men have in common, she is, in part, a signifier and hyphen joining them together.
12. See *Every Man In His Humour* for the relationship between Kiteley and his foundling son, Cash.
13. Samuel Coleridge is recorded in *Table Talk* (1835) as having said, "I think the *Ædipus Tyrannus*, *The Alchemist*, and *Tom Jones*, the three most perfect plots ever planned." Jonson's shift from the courtship plot of Renaissance drama to a plot almost wholly concerned with the theme of rivalry between father and son for inheritance is perhaps hinted at here by Coleridge. The plots of the three texts are about *foundlings* and the discovery of origins, a theme at the heart of *The Alchemist*.