

# The alchemy of images in Ben Jonson's comedy "The Alchemist"

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## ABSTRACT

As you know, the poet and playwright Ben Jonson (1572--1637) liked to use personal satire in his plays -- to bring out his acquaintances.

We will tell you who we identified in his famous comedy "The Alchemist".

In the Renaissance, the occupations of alchemy, astrology, kabbalah and other magic ceased to be secrets, they came to the surface. Moreover, they became an intellectual fashion -- crowned persons and higher clergy were carried away by them, staff alchemists and astrologers appeared at the courts; Emperor Rudolph II, who was in Prague, was especially supportive of them.

We can say that the playwright and poet Ben Jonson (1572—1637) stood out because he looked at the world with a sober eye and rejected all manifestations of hermeticism and mysticism. Being brought up in the classical ancient tradition, he did not take seriously the Rosicrucians, as if they were able to enter into relations with spirits – this was the same mystics for him (some limitation of his mental outlook was also manifested here). He was an enemy of the Puritans, who considered the theater to be devilry; in his opinion, they dragged the country back, seeking to destroy old merry England.

Jonson was critical of astrology -- although he himself knew how to make horoscopes, but did not believe in them -- and alchemy. It is clear that from a historical point of view, there was nothing absurd in the views of alchemists: after all, only in the 20th century science revealed the true mechanisms and conditions of transmutation of elements, showing the fallacy of their attempts to turn simple metals into gold. But the main thing that did not escape Jonson's penetrating gaze and against which he could not pass by: charlatanism flourished in the field of "secret knowledge".

In the prologue to his early play "Every Man is Out of his Humor" (1599), he wrote: *"And to these courteous eyes oppose a mirror / As large as is the stage whereon we act / Where they shall see the time's deformity / Anatomised in every nerve and sinew"*. His "Alchemist" also became a similar mirror -- in it the author ridiculed both deceiving alchemists and the greedy and gullible public who fell for their promises.

This comedy is considered one of Jonson's highest achievements: it is significant in content, good in composition, and shows interesting characters. It was first staged by the troupe "The King's Servant" in 1610 and published in 1612.

(There are two translations into Russian: Boris Pasternak -- published in 1931, and Polina Melkova -- in 1960.)

#### DRAMATIS PERSONAE.

SUBTLE, the Alchemist

FACE, the Housekeeper.

DOLL COMMON, their Colleague.

DAPPER, a Lawyer's Clerk.

DRUGGER, a Tobacco Man.

LOVEWIT, Master of the House.

SIR EPICURE MAMMON, a Knight.

PERTINAX SURLY, a Gamester.

TRIBULATION WHOLESOME, a Pastor of Amsterdam.

ANANIAS, a Deacon there.

KASTRIL, the angry Boy.  
DAME PLIANT, his Sister, a Widow.  
Neighbours.  
Officers, Attendants, etc.  
SCENE — LONDON.

Let's take a quick look at the plot:

The owner of the house LOVEWIT leaves London during the plague epidemic, leaving the dwelling under the supervision of a servant FACE. The latter, together with SUBTLE, who was posing as an alchemist and astrologer, and his accomplice DOLL COMMON, usually use the house (where the alchemical laboratory is supposedly located) to extort money from numerous simpletons, promising everyone the fulfillment of his desires. Exactly:

- the voluptuous knight SIR EPICURE MAMMON and fanatical puritans from Holland -- the philosopher's stone that turns any metal into gold, and also serves as an elixir of immortality;

- Assistant attorney DAPPER -- constant winnings in gambling;

- to the tobacco merchant DRAGGER -- a magical way to decorate his store, which will greatly expand trade;

- the provincial brawler CASTRIL, eager to learn the rules of a challenge to a duel -- a good match for his widowed rich sister, Madame PLIANT.

Nevertheless, there was a certain Thomas the Unbeliever (PERTINAX SURLY), who realized that all these people were victims of fraudsters, and tried to open his eyes, but gullible simpletons did not want to listen to him and kicked him out. As wrote Sebastian Brant in his satirical poem *'The Ship of Fools'* (1494), «Alchemy shows us credibly, That tricksters make friendship with silly».

Then LOVEWIT returns unexpectedly, and he amazed at what is happening in his own home. SUBTLE and DOLL flee, and FACE manages to extinguish his master's anger by marrying him to Mrs PIIANT (by the way, LOVEWIT means "loves wit," and some believe Ben Jonson is reflected in him).

Coverage by a contemporary of such a phenomenon as the activities of alchemists (and pseudo-alchemists) is already of great interest for understanding the mores of that era. But the play is valuable to us in another way: Jonson's addiction to personal satire is known, and we believe that in this comedy he remained faithful to him. What real people did he bring to the stage? We will limit ourselves to considering only the main characters -- the three fraudsters and their most significant client, Sir EPICURUS MAMMON.

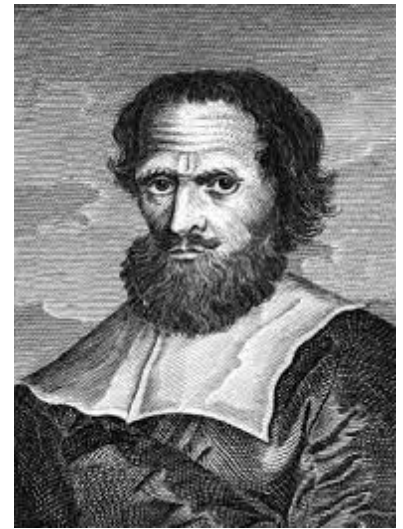
We will immediately reveal the cards and say who we identified in them. It has long been suggested (and we agree with it) that the prototype of the "magician" SUBTLE (=sophisticated) is the famous occultist, healer and astrologer Simon Forman. His henchmen FACE (one of the meanings of this word is arrogance) and Doll Common (DOLL = attractive woman, COMMON = common, simple), according to our hypothesis, are Captain Alfonso Lanier and his wife Emilia Lanier. Well, EPICURE MAMMON (= Epicurus + wealth, earthly goods) is a lawyer, philosopher Francis Bacon.

It should be noted that Jonson's `The Alchemist` became the next play after `Epicoene, or The Silent Woman` (at the end of 1609). In the article [1] about "Epicoene" we have already talked about these persons who, in our opinion, appear in "Alchemist" as well.

The son of a small shopkeeper Simon Forman (1552--1611) studied at school for several years, but after the death of his father he became an assistant merchant (including medicinal plants). In 1580 he went to Holland, the then center of

astrological knowledge, to study this matter; on his return he began to practice as an astrologer and physician.

Gradually he became widely known, among those who turned to him there were important persons (however, many considered him a charlatan, and Forman even ended up in prison). He wrote many works on topics close to him, but during the life of the author, only one of his works was published.



He recorded the medical histories of his patients in detail in a diary, where they were adjacent to entries on various other topics (for example, impressions from the plays he watched, including Shakespeare's). Now his notebooks (they have been preserved) have become the subject of deciphering and study, since they contain important information about the state of medicine, the activities of astrologers and other aspects of life in then-England.

Emilia (Amelia) Lanier (1569--1645) -- the illegitimate daughter of the court musician Baptista Bassano (according to some sources, a Jew by origin, possibly a Sephardic Maran), who arrived in Albion from Italy in the mid-1500s, and Protestant Margaret Johnson. After the death of her father, the seven-year-old girl was given to be raised in an aristocratic family, and when she grew up, the elderly Lord Chamberlain Hansdon made her his mistress. In 1592, Emilia, being his kept woman, was expecting a child, and she was paid off -- "for cover" she was married to her cousin, also a musician, Alfonso Lanier, well provided for financially. Many of Emilia's relatives were associated with music, and she also played the harpsichord.

Alfonso Lanier (1572--1613) immediately after his marriage went on a sea voyage, he was awarded the rank of captain; in 97 he participated in an expedition to the Azores, then spent two years in Ireland, where the British suppressed the

rebellion. As a court musician (he played at the queen's funeral), he was also engaged in various rude amusements (such as dog-baiting of bears and bulls). He was approached by Lord Burley, who granted him a monopoly on weighing hay and straw in London. As we said, he was married to Emilia, which determined his dependent position; it is not surprising that their family life did not work out.

So, we believe that Jonson reflected in the play this trinity of real people, and the main source of information about them is Forman's diaries. In 1973, the English historian and Shakespeare scholar Leslie Rowse discovered in them records of the period 1597--1600, concerning Emilia Lanier, and came to the conclusion that it was she who was the Swarthy Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets. So, Lanier became the center of attention of Shakespeare scholars (one of them, the Briton John Hudson, even put forward an extravagant hypothesis that she was working under the pseudonym "Shakespeare"; in 2014 his book "The Dark Lady of Shakespeare" was published).

As a patient, Lanier shared her intimate secrets and biographical facts with the "doctor". From Forman's notes, in particular, we learn [2]:

- what did she want to know from the astrologer, whether her husband would be knighted and when she would become a real lady;
- that she had several miscarriages;
- that the queen and many nobles patronized her, and she often received gifts;
- that a noble gentleman loved her very much and did a lot for her, but he died;
- that her husband treated her badly, squandered her fortune;
- that now she is in great need, she has debts.

About her horoscope: she will achieve a high position, but her husband is unlikely to become a knight.

Forman's diary shows that he often persuaded (and successfully) patients to have sexual relations. The lines, apparently referring to Lanier: "The horoscope shows a woman who has one thing on her mind — the satisfaction of desire." Then he asks himself the question: if I go to her tonight or tomorrow, will she want to receive me? The date took place, and he spent time with her, noting her kind attitude (she allowed him a lot, but not everything).

There is a record in Latin that Emilia is said to be able to summon spirits and enchant men with witchcraft. In a fit of irritation, he calls her a "whore" and exclaims: "Isn't she an incubus?" (an incubus is a demon, an evil spirit or a person to whom they obey). In this regard, Forman asks himself whether to break up with her? (Quite natural fears: practicing black magic did not bode well in that era.)

The astrologer repeatedly visited Emilia, each time, however, guessing by the horoscope whether to go or not. The relationship with this "harmful woman", who built him "all sorts of intrigues", lasted for several years. Later, he records that she was a cocoon and treated him badly. As you can see, even for such a grated roll as Forman, Lanier turned out to be a tough nut to crack.

In general, the image of Emilia -- a sexy, not stupid woman with a strong character, making big plans -- arises from his recordings. And at the same time -- lady of the demimonde of dubious reputation. "You are decorated with virtues that others are far from" (N. Nekrasov).

Alfonso also turned to Forman, as he wanted to get an astrological forecast before his departure in 1597. This means that the healer knew this married couple from both sides.

Let's return to the "Alchemist". Does the given information about Forman, Alfonso and Emilia agree with the images of the three scammers? In our opinion, yes: Subtle is the boss, domineering and self-confident; Face is an arrogant and cunning type (they call him captain, he has a form -- a hint of Alfonso); Doll is a rather cheeky woman, belongs to both men, as if *ménage à trois* (Common is common), that is, about as in life.

The lady is of the greatest interest, because, in our opinion, this is Emilia Lanier, and she, according to Rowse's hypothesis (which we share), is the Dark Lady of the sonnets. First of all, Doll is irresistibly attractive to many, and it is used as a "bait" to attract customers (Subtle and Face sometimes grapple because of her).

She has a well-hung tongue, and she is able, like a rattle, to carry nonsense, calling meaninglessly different biblical and historical names and events. It should be borne in mind that she played out such scenes deliberately – in order to get rid of overly persistent suitors (whom she first lured-encouraged – this was her main function in the "criminal group"), that is, her tirades cannot be taken literally. Nevertheless, here we get some significant, albeit indirect, information about it -- after all, the nonsense expressed by a person also somehow characterizes him.

Face warned clients that she had seizures when she became deranged. And he instructed them how to behave: she is a child of nature, chat with her about physics, about algebra, about the structure of the state, about debauchery -- she won't even raise an eyebrow, but you can't argue with her; she is a very learned person, but studying Broughton's books, she went crazy on Judea: at the mere mention of her, she gets into a rage, begins to talk in a learned language about all sorts of pedigrees, and you can't stop her; the main thing is not a word about rabbis. [Hugh Broughton (1549--1612) was an English priest who was addicted to Hebrew literature and sometimes wrote in the style of medieval Kabbalists.]



One of those who fell under the spell of Doll is Epicurus Mammon. He was very attracted to her, and to cool his ardor, she staged a similar scene, starting, as usual, to talk nonsense a la Broughton. A disappointed fan in his heart called her "Madam rabbi" (one can notice the special relationship of Doll with Judaism).

She can be funny and seductive, or she can be very rude. Her words: I will depict the habits of secular ladies that will not yield to the maids in rudeness. Face said about her origin: you need to praise her house and nobility. Doll: I am not a lady, the daughter of a seedy baron; we lack the tinsel and glitter that accompany nobility, but still we do not lose family honor. Face: Her father is an apple peddler.

Let's note an important fact for us: she plays the zither (after all, Lanier also played music).

Now let's turn to Epicurus Mammon. This is a detailed, interesting figure: he is educated, intelligent, talks a lot about alchemy, its possibilities to make mankind happy. But behind this lies only his personal thirst for wealth and pleasure. At the end of the play, in response to Lovewit's mocking remark about Mammon's broken hopes of turning various metal belongings into gold, he replied: it is not I who suffer, but the public interest.

As you know, Francis Bacon studied alchemy, spoke about it in his writings, generally treating it critically: "The activity of alchemists brought something, but as if by chance and in passing... For the theory they have invented confuses the experiments more than it contributes to them. Also, those who have immersed themselves in the so-called natural magic have discovered little -- it is lightweight and close to cheating."

Alchemists for him are pure empiricists, acting blindly, without prior study of nature, disclosure of its laws. And the pathos of his philosophy: it is the scientific method that is the force that will allow us to conquer nature and ensure the prosperity of the state. Moreover, universal enrichment is not an end in itself for

him: "Wealth exists to spend it, and spending exists to do good and thereby gain honor."

As we can see, he seemed to care only about the welfare of his neighbors, but this did not quite harmonize with the character of the thinker: contemporaries noted Bacon's barrenness, his love of luxury (as you know, at the end of his life, the Lord Chancellor was accused of bribery). Therefore, the words from the sonnet of W. Wordsworth «*Plain living and high thinking*» are not about him.

The author of the play gave the character the "talking" surname Mammon, and added the name Epicurus to it. Everyone knew Horace's expression: *Epicuri de grege porcus* - "a piglet from the herd of Epicurus" (the poet meant himself, admitting that Epicurus' philosophy was close to him); the comparison of Epicureans with pigs was a running one -- so the Stoics dubbed them, vulgarly interpreting Epicurus' teaching simply as a call to sensual pleasures. On the other hand, the surname Bacon (bacon, ham) was also associated with a pig (hog, boar); he himself played this fact, the hog was present in Bacon's coat of arms. So, the hint of it is quite transparent.

The comedy also talks about Mammon's projects. Face: he dreamed of building a new city in which there would be moats with silver shores filled with sweet cream, so that on Sundays, students and sewing girls could feed in them for free. Jonson ridiculed Bacon's projectionism in other plays, for example, in "The Devil is an Ass."

The playwright knew Bacon well, noted his outstanding abilities as an orator and other virtues, but, as a satirist, ridiculed his weaknesses. The usual practice of this comedian, who did not spare even the people closest to him.

Let's pay attention to one mystery of the play: a person who is not directly related to the plot is repeatedly mentioned -- it is said about a certain relative of Doll, her brother-lord. Since Ben Jonson was a classicist, there must be a good

reason for such additions, that is, he wanted to tell something important. Here are a few such places:

- Face about Doll: This is my lord's sister. She is mad, sent to us by her brother.

- Mammon: I know the reasons for the lady's strangeness -- her brother told me everything. When Mammon is asked to tell this brother's name, he says that he forgot it, and a little later: ah, I remembered, but that person did not want his name to be known. Mammon swears that this is his friend, a respectable man.

- Mammon to Doll: Your brother, my lord, is well, I hope? Doll: My brother is indeed a lord, but I am not a lady.

- Knock on the door, Face: Is it the lady's brother? His coach is at the door. Avoid his sight, for he's as furious as his sister's mad.

We see that Doll has a relative, a lord, and Mammon-Bacon knows him well, but can't name him. What is this mysterious person who does not show up and whose name is not revealed? Is it the Earl of Rutland? It is known, Jonson often talked about his main rival in the theatrical sphere, Rutland, portrayed him, caricatured him in his writings, but never directly named him. It seems that here we see another example of such silence. (As I tried to show in the article about "Epicoen" [1], there were Laniers behind a colorful married couple of Otters, and behind the character Amorous La-Foole -- Roger Manners Earl Rutland. At the beginning of the play, La-Foole said that Mrs. Otter was his maternal relative. By the way, Dr. Forman was also mentioned in that play.)

And in his next comedy, the author insistently repeats that Doll (again, as we think, Emilia) has a lord relative. So, it is acceptable to assume that she was a relative of the Earl of Rutland on the maternal side (which is in principle possible).

And in conclusion, one more question. Literary historians have long known the name Lanier, since in 1611 the book *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (Hail,

God, King of the Jews) was published. The author, as we read, "Emilia Lanier, wife of Captain Alfonso Lanier". The central part of this poetry collection was a religious poem with the same name, in which the dignity of women was defended on historical and biblical material (therefore, the poetess is considered one of the first feminists).

However, the Russian scholar Ilia Gililov argued in his book [3] that it was a hoax and the real author was another person (in his opinion, Elizabeth, Earl Rutland's wife). I think he is right: in the poem, in addition to good poetic skill, the high structure of the soul of the person who wrote it was clearly manifested. However, Forman's notes and Jonson's plays point that Lanier, for all her attractive features, did not possess this quality.

Anyway, this woman played a significant role in Shakespeare's life, which was reflected in his dramaturgy and poetry -- here Leslie Rowse is right (but he was wrong about the problem of authorship, remaining a Stratfordian). And Ben Jonson made a very important and useful thing for us: he brought the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's "Sonnets" to the bright light of the footlights.

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## Addendum

What did Emilia Lanier look like?

There are no her reliable portraits and this woman played, I believe, a significant role in the life of the fifth Earl of Rutland (which is reflected in his works -- see our book "Shakespeare: Faces and Masks" [1]). Two portraits by Nicholas Hilliard are usually cited as probable images of her:



One (on the left) dates from 1590. The other is 1593; however, experts are inclined to believe that the second is Mrs. Holland -- lady in waiting to Elizabeth I, aged 26 (this is the inscription in the Victoria and Albert Museum, where both miniatures are kept).

I drew attention to another woman's portrait, its author well-known painter Isaac Oliver. The same museum says: Oliver, Unknown Lady (c. 1595--1600).



She seems to have Semitic features, and Emilia was half Jewish. Let`s recall the words from sonnet 127 about the Dark Lady`s eyes: *they mourners seem...* and the final lines: *Yet so they mourn becoming of their woe, That every tongue says beauty should like`.*

The lady holds her hands in a special way, maybe it means something (for example, that she is carrying a child)? Lanier gave birth to at least two children -- a son (at the beginning of 1593) and a daughter (in December 1598), who died at the age of ten months; as Emilia confessed to healer and astrologer Simon Forman, she had many miscarriages.

#### LITERATURE

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