

Jonson's Satire of Puritanism
in *The Alchemist*

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It has become a commonplace in Jonsonian criticism to refer to the dramatically effective use of cant, particularly in *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*. Alexander Sackton has identified Jonson's contribution to the modern connotation of the word 'cant' as 'the use of the special phraseology of a particular class or subject' while Jonas Barish has made a detailed study of the 'linguistic caricature', focusing in an illuminating way on the characteristic clichés, formulas and rhythms of the Puritan pulpit and the logic of the casebook as a means of suggesting hypocrisy in *Bartholomew Fair*.¹

What has not been adequately explored, however, is the accuracy with which Jonson contextualizes his Puritan figures. Margot Heinemann refers to Middleton's and also to Jonson's more mordant anti-Puritan satire as making fun of the 'sectaries'. Alastair Hamilton, in tracing the history of the Familist sect, claims rather sweepingly that Middleton's *The Family of Love* as well as Ben Jonson's *Eastward Hoe* and *The Alchemist* sneer at Familism. Most other critics of Jonson, with the exception of Bertil Johansson, who points to some specific allusions, have been content to accept the blanket term 'Puritan' in defining the objects of Jonson's religious satire.² The aim of this paper is then to look more carefully at the contemporary frame of reference and the sources on which Jonson drew in his satire of religious cant and hypocrisy in *The Alchemist*.

1 Alexander H. Sackton, *Rhetoric as a Dramatic Language in Ben Jonson* (London, 1967), p.49; Jonas Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (New York, 1970), pp.197-204.

2 See Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1980), p.82; Alastair Hamilton, *The Family of Love* (Cambridge, 1981), p.135; Bertil Johansson, *Religion and Superstition in the Plays of Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton* (New York, 1966), pp.94-159.

Jonson, far more than Shakespeare, contextualizes his plays within a contemporary framework. Accordingly, there is a far greater reliance on allusion to enhance the satirical effect. The time and setting of *The Alchemist* is contemporary London. Herford and Simpson have pointed out that 'several passages imply that the action is itself supposed to take place in this very year, 1610'—that is, the date of the play's composition and also of its first performance.³ Concerning the setting, Subtle explicitly refers to Lovewit's house as being 'here, in the *friers*' (I.i.17), a neighbourhood which Dol Common identifies as Puritan. In trying to stop the noisy quarrel between the two rogues, with which the play begins, she tells Face:

Who shall take your word?
A whore sonne, vpstart, *apocryphall* captayne,
Whom not a puritane in black-*friers*, will trust
So much, as for a feather!

(I.i.126-9)

She prevails amusingly with:

Shall we goe make
A sort of sober, sciruy, precise neighbours,
(That scarce have smil'd twise, sin' the king came in)
A feast of laughter, at our follies? raskalls,
Would runne themselues from breath, to see me ride,
Or you t'haue but a hole, to thrust your heads in,
For which you should pay eare-rent?

(I.i.163-9)

The satire is rich. On a literal level there is a comment on the shrewdness of the Puritan feather-makers, taunted for their trade in such fashionable frivolities.⁴ Taken figuratively, on the plot level, the shrewd judgement of the Blackfriars Puritans will ironically be shown in reverse when the lure of gold predisposes their 'brethren' from Amsterdam willingly to trust the two rogues.

3 *Ben Jonson*, eds C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford, 1925-52), II, 87. All quotations from *The Alchemist* are from the Herford and Simpson edition.

4 Herford and Simpson, X, 59.

Dol's further swipe at the 'precise [i.e. puritanical] neighbours, /That scarce have smil'd twice sin' the king came in' contains a specific allusion to the disenchantment of the Puritans with James I. The hopes of the Puritans for the support of the new King were dashed at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604 and the King's antipathy to the Puritans soon became evident.⁵ The gleeful vindictiveness of Puritan censure of harlotry is also commented upon by Dol. Above all, by locating his play in the 'friers' Jonson is clearly making a very 'in' joke. Although *The Alchemist* was first performed in the Globe, the King's Men had taken over the Blackfriars in 1609, from which time, according to Andrew Gurr, performances were 'readily switched between the Blackfriars and the Globe'. Gurr concludes that Jonson, in fact, wrote the play especially for a Blackfriars audience and that 'the joke realism of its stating partly depends on its performance "here in the *friars*", a neighbourhood known for its wealthy Lovewits and its puritans as well as its playhouse'.⁶

In anticipating the entrance of Ananias, Subtle exclaims 'Pray god, it be my *Anabaptist*' (II.iv.20). Ananias is called 'the sanctified elder'—in the *dramatis personae* he is referred to as a 'deacon'—while Tribulation Wholesome is described as 'a pastor of Amsterdam'. They have come to negotiate with Subtle about the Stone as representatives of

... the *holy Brethren*
Of *Amsterdam*, the *exil'd Saints*: that hope
To raise their *discipline*, by it.
(II.iv.29-31)

Historians of Anabaptism and the Separatist Movement have traced the establishment of various English congregations in Holland towards the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. One of the most well known, if not the first English Anabaptist congregation in Amsterdam, was that of John Smyth, organized in 1608 or 1609. The fortunes, beliefs

5 See Graham Parry, *The Seventeenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1603-1700* (London and New York, 1989), II, 181-2.

6 Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge, 1987), pp.31, 160.

and troubles of this 'exiled' community were well publicized in England. According to Champlin Burrage, 'Books began to be written and published which soon told to the world all their troubles'.⁷ Smyth himself published a number of works, including 'PRINCIPLES /and inferences /concerning /The visible Church' (1607) in which he defined the true Church as 'A visible communion of Saints ... joyned together by covenant with God and themselves, freely to vse al the holy things of God, according to the word, for their mutual edification, and God's glory ... All religious societies except that of a visible church are vnlawful'.⁸ Another work, which appeared in 1608, is titled 'The Differences of the Churches of the seperation'. The emphasis on a separate community withdrawn from the 'world', and worship based on movement by the spirit or inner light, so typical of Anabaptism, is evident. This was followed in 1609 with 'THE CHARACTER OF THE BEAST' directed against 'baptisme in Popery' (which includes the baptism of the Church of England). In another treatise of 1609, 'PARALLELES, CENSURES, OBSERVATIONS', he prophesies the destruction of 'al the Idol Temples when the howre of their visitation shal come'.⁹

Another interesting document which reveals the kind of language used by separatists such as Smyth's congregation is a letter by two members of his flock rejecting an exhortation by a relation 'to returne home to England'. They respond that such a move 'should be much and nighly displeasing vnto vnto [sic] oure good god and father, that hath in his mercifull providence brought vs owt of Babilon the Mother of all abominations the habitation of devils [?] and the holde, of all foule spirites [?] and A cage of every vncleane and hatefull birde'.¹⁰

One hears the same vocabulary and rhythms in Ananias's cumulative fulminations: 'abomination/Is in the house', 'the

7 Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters* (Cambridge, 1912), I, 232.

8 Quoted in Burrage, I, 233.

9 See Burrage, I, 239, 240.

10 An undated letter sent by Hughe and Anne Bromhead to their cousin, (Sir) William Hammerton, at London, probably written some time in 1609 in Burrage, II, 172-3.

place, / It is become a cage of unclean birds'. Such language must have had a familiar ring to Jonson's audience. What is more, the whole controversy surrounding the 'exiled Saints' in Amsterdam and their publicized beliefs must have been of sufficient topical interest for Jonson to be able to assume that his London audience of 1610 would be amused by the figures of the 'pastor of Amsterdam' and his 'deacon'.

Apart from the repeated references to the 'exiled saints', the 'exil'd brothers', Tribulation looks forward to the 'restoring of the silenc'd saints', while the notion of 'separation' is given a specialized connotation. Tribulation consoles Ananias for the blasting he has received from the Alchemist who confutes him on biblical grounds because of his name:

These chastisements are common to the *Saints*,
 And such rebukes we of the *Separation*
 Must beare, with willing shoulders, as the trialls
 Sent forth, to tempt our frailties.

(III.i.1-4)

The underlying notion here is the Anabaptist acceptance of the theology of martyrdom, the concept of suffering as a way to victory. Tribulation's 'we of the Separation' and Ananias's sanctimonious acquiescence, later, to withdraw in humble prayer with 'the whole companie of the Separation' (IV.vii.85) also correspond to the Anabaptist belief that the true church is separated from the 'world'. Their 'discipline' is one of a separate brotherhood of 'sincere professors'. Jonson mocks both the principles of nonconformity to the world and self-righteous exclusivity when he reveals the underlying unscrupulousness of Ananias who would willingly 'cossen' orphans whose parents 'were not of the *faithfull*' (II.v.60).

Some scholars have found it necessary to differentiate between Puritans in the generalized sense and Separatists. The former included those who wished for reforms within the established Church of England while the latter regarded the Church of England itself with its hierarchical system of church government as apostate. Jonson's Anabaptists are accurately defined as Separatists, as Subtle is well aware of their 'hope of rooting out

the *Bishops*,/Or th' *Antichristian Hierarchie*' (II.v.82-3).

The Anabaptists saw themselves as the successors to the prophets and apostles whose holy zeal was directly inspired by the spirit of God. Hence 'inspirationism' was the fulcrum of their belief. Spiritual truths were perceived by revelation through the movement or prompt-ing of the Spirit. Jonson makes fun of the possibilities for abuse to which this belief could lead. Tribulation, who is an arch-hypocrite, uses the idea of the spirit rising and being fanned into a red-hot zeal as part of his mock-casuistic argument in overcoming Ananias's scruples against the Alchemist and his work:

... It may be so,
When as the *worke* is done, the *stone* is made,
This heate of his may turne into a zeale,
And stand vp for the *beauteous discipline*,
Against the menstruous cloth, and ragg of *Rome*.
We must await his calling, and the comming
Of the good spirit ...

(III.i.29-35)

Ananias, convinced by the cant, enthuses about the notion of the spirit or inner light:

I haue not edified more, truely, by man;
Not, since the *beautifull light*, first, shone on me.
(III.i.45-6)

Finally, the calculating pastor confronts the Alchemist unctuously but slyly:

The *Brethren* had no purpose, verely,
To giue you the least grieuance: but are ready
To lend their willing hands, to any proiect
The spirit, and you direct ...

(III.ii.11-14)

However, he has difficulty restraining Ananias's over-zealous interjections and dogmatic insistence on correcting Subtle's 'impure' use of terms. In a bold parody of Christ, Tribulation as pastor tries unsuccessfully to silence his recalcitrant deacon:

SYDNEY STUDIES

I doe command thee, spirit (of zeale, but trouble),
To peace within him.

(III.ii.84-5)

He assures Subtle:

It is an ignorant zeale, that haunts him, sir.
But truly, else, a very faithful *Brother*,
A botcher: and a man, by reuelation,
That hath a competent knowledge of the truth.

(III.ii.111-14)

Of course, what Jonson shows is that the 'truth' made known 'by revelation' to his holy brethren is in every instance merely a justification of their underlying motives of self-interested acquisitiveness. This was, precisely, Hooker's objection to unqualified belief in the promptings of the Spirit: any so-called motion of the spirit could be a 'pretext' for what was really a personal motivation. In fact, in the figure of Ananias, Jonson seems almost to be dramatizing Hooker's analysis of 'the sectarian mind'.¹¹ Jonson also takes up Hooker's point about the implications of rejecting all outward authority, whether ecclesiastical or civil. Ananias is quick to point out, 'We know no Magistrate' (III.ii.150).

Hooker's concern is to show the results 'when the minds of men are once erroneously persuaded that it is the will of God to have those things done which they fancy for confusion unto the wise and great, the poor and the simple, some Knipperdoling with his retinue, must take the work of the Lord in hand; and the making of church laws and orders must prove to be their right in the end'.¹² In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries all Anabaptists were commonly identified with the eccentric political doctrines of Knipperdoling and John of Leyden, the leaders of the short-lived 'Kingdom of God' in Münster during 1534-6.¹³ Jonson echoes Hooker or is following the popular tradition when

11 The point is made by H.C. Porter, Part XIII, '1593: Richard Hooker's Analysis of the Sectarian Mind' in *Puritanism in Tudor England* (London, 1970), p.245.

12 Richard Hooker, Chapter 8 of the Preface to *Of The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* in Porter, pp.245-6.

13 Herford and Simpson, X, 86-7.

he makes Subtle refer disparagingly to Ananias as 'you Knipperdoling' (II.v.13) and to both brethren as 'my brace of little Iohn Leydens' (III.iii.24)

Similarly, the sect known as the Family of Love, whose founder was Hendrick Niclaus, was frequently confused with the Anabaptists.¹⁴ At the end of *The Alchemist* Lovewit, mistaking Drugger for another one of the brethren, beats him off with 'Away, you Harry Nicholas, doe you talke?' (V.v.117). Here again, Jonson seems to accept the commonly held view or he may be indicating that his religious satire is meant to embrace all the more extreme sects within the Separatist movement. In another context he does make a clear distinction between Doppers or Anabaptists and the more eccentric of the 'inspirationist' sects. In the masque *News from the New World Discovered in the Moon* there is a reference to 'A world of Doppers! but they are there as lunatick persons, walkers onely; that have leave only to hum, and ha, not daring to prophecie, or start upon stooles to raise doctrine' (ll. 205-8).

What emerges from Jonson's dramatization of 'the sectarian mind' is that his satire is given considerable bite through his deliberate allusions to contemporary Anabaptism—or what was included under 'Anabaptism'. At the same time, it needs to be pointed out that in drawing his satirical portraits of the two Anabaptists, Jonson amalgamated the attitudes and language shared by different forms of extreme Puritanism. For example, the suspicion of and violent opposition to Roman Catholicism were common to Puritans of various shades. As a convert to Catholicism between 1598-1610¹⁵ Jonson was clearly sensitive

14 Cf. James I who in the 1603 Preface to the *Basilikon Doron* tried to define his use of the term 'Puritan': The name of Puritan doth properly belong only to that vile sect amongst the Anabaptists, called the Family of Love; because they think themselves only pure... Of this special sect I principally mean when I speak of Puritans ... and partly, indeed, I give this style to such brainsick and heady preachers their disciples and followers, as refusing to be called of that sect, yet participate too much with their humours. (*Basilikon Doron*, ed. J. Craigie (Edinburgh, 1944), p.15).

15 Rosalind Miles, *Ben Jonson: His Life and Work* (London and New York, 1986), pp.40, 138-9.

to such sentiments. So, in the exaggerated invective of Ananias against anything remotely 'popish' Jonson derides hysterical antagonism against the Roman Church.

Because the very word 'mass' suggests popery, Ananias insists, apparently in accordance with Puritan custom,¹⁶ that it be replaced by '*Christ-tide*' (III.ii.43). Similarly, bells are associated with the Catholic liturgy and so Ananias declares: 'Bells are profane: a tune may be religious'. Some Puritans went as far as insisting that organs be removed from all churches. Only the singing of psalms was permitted. Subtle makes fun of this when he calls 'a tune to call the flock together ... your bell' (III.ii.58-60). Any form of ritual or tendency to argue from tradition was regarded with suspicion. When Subtle uses the word 'tradition' Ananias interjects:

I hate *Traditions*:
I do not trust them ... They are *Popish*, all.
(III.ii.106-7)

In the Puritan mind Spain was identified with Catholicism: the threat of Spain was also the threat of Catholicism. The Spanish were seen as the agents of the Pope, i.e. the Antichrist. In his satire of Surley's Spanish garb Jonson is girding at several things. He is poking fun at the vogue for extravagant Spanish fashions at King James's court. At the same time he is mocking the austerity of the Puritans as well as their vituperative hatred of the Roman Catholic Spaniards. Ananias's diatribe against Surley's 'Spanish slops' contains all the usual Puritan cant-terms levelled against Romish practices:

... They are profane,
Leud, superstitious, and idolatrous breeches.
(IV.vii.48-9)

Once triggered off his fulminations are unstoppable:

Auoid *Sathan*,
Thou art not of the light. That ruffe of pride,
About thy neck, betrayes thee ...

16 M. van Beek, *An Enquiry into Puritan Vocabulary* (Groningen, 1969) pp.40-41.

Thou look'st like *Antichrist*, in that leud hat.
(IV.vii.50-55)

The detailed observations concerning Surley's costume are interesting. As a protest against the Spanish fashion of broad, starched ruffs and feather-trimmed hats the Puritans wore small ruffs and less elaborate hats.¹⁷ Having routed the 'proud Spanish fiend' Ananias turns his singleminded attention to the business in hand. He readily accepts the notion that the 'Spaniard' has been sent with the express purpose of spying on the actions of the 'brethren', but, he announces with sanctimonious rectitude, since it has been... 'reueal'd./That casting of money is most *lawfull*' (IV.vii.77-8), the deal must be seen through. What Jonson is ridiculing here is not only Puritan over-scrupulousness, but the hypocrisy often underlying such scruples. Van Beek has demonstrated the appropriation by the Puritans of the terms 'lawful' and 'unlawful' with the aid of characteristic quotations, for example, the following:

'Whom Christ findeth with their hearts asleepe, in eating and drinking, building, bargaining; that is following lawfull thinges, but with neglect of godlyness, and therefore unlawfully'.¹⁸

It is easy to see how, by restricting the sense, Ananias and his 'holy synod' might persuade themselves that any sharp practice is 'lawfull' as long as it is done in a spirit of 'godlyness'!

Seen in this context, the Puritan catch-phrase with which Ananias complacently takes his leave acquires a poignant irony:

... The peace of mind
Rest with these walls ... (IV.vii.87-8)

Earlier I have compared Ananias's vituperative invective with the kind of language actually used in the letter cited. Ananias's performance also typifies what Hooker has termed 'the apocalyptic rancour' of Puritanism. When the fraud of Subtle's alchemy has been discovered he thunders like an Old Testament prophet:

17 Cf. Subtle's comment: 'He lookes in that deepe ruffe, like a head in a platter' (IV.iii.24); and Johansson, pp.137-8.

18 P. Baynes, *Christian Letters*, E10 in Van Beek, p.79.

Come forth, you seed of sulphure, sons of fire,
Your stench, it is broke forth: abomination
Is in the house.

(V.iii.44-6)

Then he rounds on Kastril who is clamouring for his sister:

Call her not sister. Shee is a harlot, verily.

(V.iii.51)

Interestingly, as Herford and Simpson have noted (V, 279), Jonson saw fit to tone down his satire on the Puritan habit of citing phrases from Scripture—possibly because he feared that within the context of a play it would be regarded as blasphemous. Thus we find that whereas the quarto (1612) reads ‘Seed of Vipers, Sonnes of Belial’ the line was changed in the folio (1616) to ‘you seed of sulphure, sonnes of fire’ (V.iii.44). Similarly, the ‘Vessels Of Shame, and of dishonour’ became ‘the vessells /Of Pride, lust, and the cart’ (V.v.23-4). ‘Abomination’, used frequently in the Old Testament, had apparently become a familiar and favourite term in the mouths of Puritans.

Jonson deliberately exploits the Puritan preoccupation with the Old Testament by making Ananias proclaim with typical zealous bigotry: ‘All’s heathen but the Hebrew’.¹⁹ He equates ‘heathen Greek’ and ‘the language of Canaan’ when commenting on Subtle’s alchemical language. The linking of ‘heathen’ and bearing ‘the visible mark of the beast in his forehead’—the Antichrist of Revelation—shows the absurd extent of Ananias’s narrowmindedness. The irony is, of course, that Ananias is right about Subtle—up to a point! But the satire is focused on the way in which Ananias lumps together all ancient languages—except the language of the Old Testament. Latin, as the language of the Church of Rome, was commonly referred to as ‘the language of the Beast’. What is revealed here is Ananias’s real ignorance while there is also a gibe at the wilful attitude of some Puritans to learning. Ananias, it is to be noted, warns Tribulation against the lure of the Stone that ‘with *Philosophie*, blinds the eyes of man’ (III.i.10).

19 See Herford and Simpson X, 87 on the Puritan acceptance of Hebrew as a sacred language.

Finally, Jonson's anti-Puritan satire is perhaps best illustrated by Subtle's enumeration of hypocrisies that can be abandoned once the Saints are in possession of all the wealth promised through the Stone. First he cunningly tempts Tribulation, the more knowing of the two Puritan hypocrites, by exposing the unacknowledged political ambitions of the spiritual brotherhood. Tribulation falls straight into the trap:

Sub. ... What can you not doe,
 Against lords spirituall, or temporall,
 That shall oppone you? *Tri.* Verily, 'tis true.
 We may be temporall lords, our selues, I take it.
 (III.ii.49-52)

Although Jonson could not have foreseen it, in the light of the subsequent Puritan Revolution, these words have a curiously prophetic ring!

The list that follows draws partly on a variety of practices associated with Puritanism or is culled from Phillip Stubbes whose *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583) seems an obvious source (to be dealt with presently).

The longwindedness of Puritan forms of worship was a source of constant ridicule. Among many others John Donne wrote a satirical piece on the subject of 'Why Puritans Make Long Sermons'.²⁰ Again, however, it is striking how informedly accurate Jonson's terminology is. In the letter of Hughe and Anne Bromhead from which I have already quoted, we read the following description of the services or 'exercises' in Smyth's congregation:

This Morning exercise begynes at eight of the clock[e?] and continueth vnto twelve of the clocke the like course of exercise is observed in the aft[er]n[o] urne from .2. of the clock vnto .5. or .6. of the Clocke. last of all the execution of the g[over]nment of the church is handled ...²¹

20 John Donne, *Paradoxes and Problems* (Oxford, 1980), pp.43-4. Cf. also William P. Holden, *Anti-Puritan Satire: 1572-1642* (New Haven, 1954), pp.72-3.

21 Burrage, II, 177.

The eccentric mannerisms affected by Puritans provided rich opportunities for satire.²² Subtle comments pointedly on mannerisms of voice and facial expression: 'your *ha* and *hum*', 'your holy vizard'. Although the imputation of 'providence' being used by hypocritical zealots to procure the wealth of the 'faithful' cannot be restricted to Puritans in the historical sense of the term, as Molière has shown in *Tartuffe*, L.C. Knights is surely right in making the point that the brethren's preoccupation with riches and Subtle's ironic reference to the forfeiture of bonds 'caricature an absorption in worldly affairs against which the Protestantism of the new business classes was insufficiently armed'.²³ More precisely, Jonson was clearly aware of exploitative practices based on economic calculus and of the possibilities of self-interested abuse inherent in the Puritan dicta of 'Christian gaining' and 'lawful prospering'.²⁴ Ruthless exploitation could—and no doubt was on occasion—masked by pietism. Even the practices of usury, it seems, could be defended as 'lawful' since the sanction of 'providence' could be invoked to justify the forfeiture of 'bonds broke but one day'!

In what follows, Subtle's minute particularization of what is permitted or not to a 'Christian ... of the holy assembly' follows Stubbes' *Anatomy of Abuses* too closely to be accidental. Stubbes also harps with scrupulous concern on the term 'unlawful' while Herford and Simpson (X, 93) have meticulously annotated the consideration

As whether a *Christian* may hawke, or hunt;
Or whether, *Matrons*, out of the holy assembly,
May lay their haire out, or weare doublets:
Or haue that idoll *Starch*, about their linnen
(III.ii.79-82)

with corresponding quotations from Stubbes.

It would then seem that the sneer of casting 'before your hungry hearers, scrupulous bones' and lying 'With zealous rage

22 Cf. Holden, pp.118-120.

23 L.C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London, 1957), p.210.

24 See William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York, 1957), p.123.

amusing satirical edge to Ananias' calling down the plagues of Egypt on the tricksters, and adding vitriolically, 'Scorpions, and Caterpillers' (V.v.21).

On the other hand, it has been argued that it was common practice for the City Authorities to engage Puritan preachers to inveigh against plays.²⁸ Especially in the 'Paul's Cross' sermons, regular attacks were launched against the stage from 1577 onwards. The denunciations revealed the typically Puritan obsession with sin. One of the earliest sermons, for example, contains the following quaint syllogism. Having stated that 'far more horrible enormities [than Sodom and Gomorrah] and swelling sins are set out by those stages, than every man thinks for', the preacher expresses satisfaction that the theatres 'are nowe forbidden because of the plague' and concludes 'and the cause of plagues is sinne, if you looke to it well: and the cause of sinne are playes: therefore the cause of plagues are playes'.²⁹

Jonson may well be having a general swipe at the Puritan pulpit rather than at specific individuals. In any event, what is significant is that Jonson here lends support to the opinion of recent scholarship that the real opposition to plays came from the City Fathers. But Jonson tended to regard the City magistrates as Puritans too.³⁰

Subtle's list ends with the ridicule of the Puritan habit of assuming names from the Old Testament or adopting a whole godly sentence as a name. The historical evidence for this custom has been extensively researched by Bertil Johansson.³¹

28 Cf. Bradbrook: 'The founding of the Theatre and the Curtain in 1576 immediately sent up the temperature of the opposition, and the Church turned on its heat; or, as it would appear, the City Fathers appealed to their clerical mercenaries' (p.67).

29 Quoted in the Introduction to Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse*, ed. Edward Arber (London, 1869), p.8.

30 Cf. Bradbrook, p.67; Heinemann, p.35, and Herford and Simpson, X, 94 on Jonson's gird at the Puritanism of the magistrates in *Cynthia's Revels*, l.iv.93-5 and *The Devil is an Ass*, V.viii.64-80.

31 Cf. *Zeal-of-the-Land Busy* and *Win-the-Fight* in *Bartholomew Fair*, and Johansson, pp.144-5.

For his parting shot at the 'earnest, vehement botcher /And deacon also', as Lovewit calls Ananias, Jonson relies on William Perkins's expostulation of Calvin's doctrine of election. Ananias draws himself up in self-righteous protest against Lovewit's acknowledgement of Mammon's claim to the 'goods', supposedly the orphans', which the brethren have purchased:

I doe defie

The wicked MAMMON, so doe all the *Brethren*,
 Thou prophane man. I aske thee, with what conscience
 Thou canst aduance that Idol, against vs,
 That haue the seale? Were not the shillings numbred,
 That made the pounds? Were not the pounds told out,
 Vpon the second day of the fourth weeke,
 In the eighth month, vpon the table dormant,
 The yeere, of the last patience of the *Saints*,
 Sixe hundred and ten?

(V.v.96-105)

Apart from the usual invective against the 'wicked', profane', 'that idol' (Mammon) and an appeal to Revelation ('us/That have the seal'), there is a parody of Perkins's metaphoric language: belief in God's predestination, he asserts, is a 'truth which will bear weight in the balance of the sanctuary'. Perkins concludes his Preface to *A Golden Chaine* as follows: 'Amen, Farewell, July 23, the yeare of the last patience of Saints 1592',³² a phrase which Ananias spins out in a direct parodic echo.

For all his self-righteous claims, or more precisely, because of them, Ananias is ignominiously dismissed and sent back to his 'cellar' in Amsterdam. The satire is mordant. Jonson deflates the dogmatic 'disputations' of Puritan divines such as Perkins on the question of election by means of Ananias's absurd, and, ultimately, materialistically motivated claims. Jonson's friend Selden got the point of his satire—although he refers specifically only to *Bartholomew Fair*:

Disputes in religion will never be ended, because there wants a measure by which the business would be decided. The Puritan would be judged by the Word of God: if he would speak

³² Quoted as letter No.10, to the Christian Reader in H.C. Porter, *Puritanism in Tudor England*, pp.293-4.

clearly he means himself, but he is ashamed to say so; and he would have me believe him before a whole Church, that has read the Word of God as well as he. One says one thing, and another another; and there is, I say, no measure to end the controversy. 'Tis just as if two men were at bowls and both judged by the eye. One says "'tis his cast," the other says, "'tis my cast;" and having no measure, the difference is eternal. Ben Jonson satirically expressed the vain disputes of divines, by Inigo Lanthorn, disputing with his puppet in a Bartholomew fair. "It is so;" "It is not so;" "It is so;" "It is not so;" crying thus one to another a quarter of an hour together.³³

According to Breward, by the end of the sixteenth century William Perkins had replaced Calvin and Beza as a theological best-seller in England.³⁴ He was thus a readily available source for the dramatist to consult in evoking Puritan vocabulary and attitudes. Yet Jonson uses Perkins in a much more sophisticated way. In plays such as *Volpone* and, particularly, in *The Alchemist* part of Jonson's aim is to demonstrate the power of language to defraud. Jonson, like Marlowe, was intrigued by the Renaissance confidence in limitless possibilities and knowledge. But Jonson was a realist. He saw that imaginative grasp of the unlimited, whether in terms of spiritual or material realities was an illusion, a trick of language to deceive oneself and others. By extension, the use of an eclectic language then becomes a powerful means to impress and awe, so, to deceive. The mystique of a specialized language is exploited by Jonson with marvellous comic effectiveness.

In one sense, the whole of *The Alchemist* is a send-up of the beguiling power of different kinds of jargon and the pretentiousness of the 'truths' they encapsulate. By juxtaposing the language of Alchemy and that of Puritanism, Jonson exposes the questionable claims of each. In Act II, scene v, Subtle runs through the alchemical process with Face, telling him to 'Answere i' the language'. He baits Ananias:

33 John Selden, *The Table Talk* (London, 1887), p.163.

34 Ian Breward (ed.), *The Work of William Perkins* (Appleford, Abingdon, 1970), Introduction p.24.

Sub. This is a *heathen Greeke*, to you, now?

And when comes *Viuification*?

Fac. After *Mortification*.

(II.v.24-5)

The joke is that these terms and the sequence of 'mortification' and 'viuification' also feature in Perkins's famous 'Chart of Salvation and Damnation' drawn up for the instruction of the 'godly'. The Chart is introduced as 'A Survey or Table declaring the Order of the Causes of Salvation and Damnation, according to God's Word. It may be read instead of an ocular Catechism to them which cannot read: for by the pointing of the Finger, they may sensibly perceive the chief Points of Religion, and the Order of them'.³⁵ Subtle's whole catechism, while alchemically correct and erudite, is then intended as a parody of Perkins.

The Reformist emphasis on the individual conscience became the hallmark of Puritanism. This explains the 'profound concern with casuistry, the study of cases of conscience and the preaching of sermons on these "cases"', noted by Van Beek.³⁶ It also explains the scrupulous need to distinguish between 'lawfulness' and 'unlaw-fulness' on which I have already commented. In *The Alchemist*, with its emphasis on the subversive power of language, the hypocrisy involved in 'solving' cases of conscience is explored to the full.

Jonas Barish has referred to William Perkins's celebrated work, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, as a possible source for the incident in *Bartholomew Fair* where Dame Purecraft appeals to Zeal-of-the-Land Busy 'to edify and raise us up in a scruple', in other words, to justify a visit to the Fair. Barish concludes that 'Busy's answer sounds suspiciously like a parody of the method used by casuists such as Perkins in unravelling moral dilemmas'.³⁷ Again, however, it is to *The Alchemist* that we must look for an even more specific parodic allusion to Perkins. The method used by Perkins in dealing with 'Questions of Conscience' is to proceed by careful

35 William Perkins in Porter, pp.295-7.

36 Van Beek, p.80

37 Barish, pp.201-2.

differentiation. For example, starting with the question of Virtue, he declares that 'according to the differences of Virtue we will distinguish the Questions ... For example, *Aristotle* makes Urbanitie a virtue, which is indeed a Sinne, being nothing else, but a dexteritie in mocking and descanting upon men's persons and names ... Now according to this distinction of virtues, the Questions of Conscience are to be distinguished'.³⁸ In Act III, scene ii of *The Alchemist* Tribulation introduces the casuistic question:

... but stay,
This act of coyning, is it lawfull?
(III.ii.148-9)

Ananias gets round it one way, Subtle in another:

Ana. Lawfull?
We know no Magistrate. Or, if we did,
This's forraine coyne. *Svb.* It is no coyning, sir.
It is but casting. (149-152)

The seemingly scrupulous pastor immediately acknowledges the 'method':

Ha? you distinguish well (152)

and Subtle ironically invokes Ananias's expertise:

beleeue Ananias:
This case of conscience he is studied in. (155-6)

In the final resort, what Jonson exploits in the deliberate corruption of Perkins's casuistry by the two hypocritical Puritans is the Catholic charge of moral relativism. Tribulation and Ananias exemplify the emphasis on holiness at the expense of righteousness.

Another Puritan divine used by Jonson is the Cambridge Hebraist, Hugh Broughton. He is explicitly referred to as the

38 *William Perkins 1558-1602 English Puritanist: His Pioneer Works on Casuistry: 'A Discourse of Conscience' and 'The Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience'*, ed. Thomas F. Merrill (Nieuwkoop, 1966), pp.163-5.

cause of the disguised Dol's 'madness'. Face tells Mammon:

... shee is a most rare schollar;
 And is gone mad with studying BRAVGHTONS workes.
 If you but name a word touching the *Hebrew*,
 Shee falls into her fit, and will discourse
 So learnedly of *genealogies*,
 As you would runne mad, too, to heare her, sir.
 (II.iii.237-42)

Mammon, of course, triggers off her 'raving' 'out of BROUGHTON' by talking 'Of a fift *Monarchy* I would erect, / With the *Philosopher's stone*' (IV.v.26-27). The satire here is directed both at Broughton's Hebraic scholarship³⁹ and at the Millenary sect, the Fifth Monarchy Men. The 'beasts', which Dol explicates from Broughton, refer to the Book of Daniel (VII) upon which the sect based their doctrine. The four beasts in Daniel were taken to represent the four great monarchies, Assyria, Persia, Greece and Rome. After the destruction of Rome would come the millennial reign of Christ and the Saints—which they believed to be imminent.

L.C. Knights in his pioneering study, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, asserts:

What we do find ... is that the material on which the dramatists work—in comedy and history play—is drawn from—has an immediate reference to—the movements, the significant figures of contemporary life. (p.6)

And again, in relation to Jonson specifically:

the matter on which the poet works ... relies ... on something outside itself, and presupposes an active relationship with a particular audience ... the satire presupposes certain general attitudes in the audience. (pp.186, 188)

I have tried to demonstrate that Jonson's portrayal of Puritanism in *The Alchemist* is rooted in actuality in this sense of the term. Although he draws on the particular tradition, he brings to his

39 Herford and Simpson (X, 105-106) have traced Doll's quotations to Broughton's *A Concoct of Scripture* (1590) and *A Revelation of the Holy Apocalypse* (1610).

dramatization a keen observation and considerable knowledge of contemporary sectarian movements, Puritan vocabulary and practices as well as Puritan literature. His use of allusion is sharp and accurate, presupposing a remarkable alertness in the audience. Contrary to general belief, Jonson is not merely taking over the stock figure of the Puritan created in the popular literature such as ballads, pamphlets and the *Characters*. In fact, Jonson's hypocritical Puritans precede their counterparts in the *Overburian Characters*, first printed in 1614 and subsequently expanded several times with the addition of new characters.⁴⁰

Finally, however, it must be emphasized that Jonson's satire of Puritanism is not introduced merely for the sake of topical interest. Jonson's preoccupation with cant—including Puritan cant—is related to his predominant dramatic concern which is to expose and attack fraud, the unscrupulous use made of men's credulity. In the discrepancy between the Puritan assumption of holiness or unworldliness and their involvement in the acquisitive practices of a capitalist society Jonson detected a fundamental hypocrisy which he attacked with merciless satire.

40 This is noted by the editor W.J. Paylor, *The Overburian Characters* (Oxford, 1936), p.x, note 1: 'The portraits of Puritans may owe something to [Jonson's] *Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*. It is interesting to note that he was a friend of Overbury'.