CHAPTER SIX

Machiavelli, Alchemy, and The Alchemist

In light of the system of knowledge discussed in the previous chapter, Jonson’s protagonists in The Alchemist seem to give concrete expression to the Machiavellian theories of self-development and self-knowledge. According to F. H. Mares, “The superiority of Subtle, Face and Dol – and it amounts to a moral superiority – is that they do not gull themselves. They have a firmer grip on reality than their dupes” (xxxv). This attitude towards themselves and their dupes may be said to epitomize the Machiavellian approach that assesses both one’s own weaknesses and strengths and those of the other, and then deliberately proceeds to exploit the other’s Achilles’ heel. Although their exploits may seem to be morally dubious from a Christian humanist perspective, they do conform quite strikingly to Machiavellism, which advocates an objective appraisal of personal qualities, whether good or bad, and then judges how best to match one’s disposition and propensity to the immediate contingencies. Haydn comments on the faltering structure of Christian humanism, and how this effected a change of attitude towards previously inviolable ‘truths’ and securities:

Here is a world, like Montaigne’s, ruled not by the known, unchanging and universal laws of a purposeful, God-guided nature, but a mutability dependent upon the indecipherable influence of the heavens – a world in which man’s standards and customs and laws and institutions do not derive from fixed and permanent and venerable norms taking form from the nature and meaning of the universe, but rather from the peculiarities of time and locality and the shifting mores of men (141).
These ‘shifting mores’ included a movement away from adherence to strict hierarchical codes and ‘birthrights’ to the fostering of individualism, personal ambition, and self-fashioning.\(^1\) Face, Dol, and Subtle evidently recognise and are prepared to take advantage of the contemporary preoccupation with self-advancement, which in turn led to a credulous acceptance of anything that promised to offer a quick and easy route to fortune and fame. This, then, was an atmosphere in which fraudsters and swindlers thrived. Jonson’s three protagonists show a peculiarly Machiavellian astuteness in cashing in on the proclivities of the times.

Another important Machiavellian trait is adaptability, or flexibility, and Face, Subtle, and Dol are nothing if not flexible. They are adept at carrying off the main deception of being masters of the esoteric arts of alchemy, astrology, numerology, and necromancy amongst others. Like consummate political animals, each of them is also skilled in the art of presenting the particular guise called for in any given situation. If one accepts that ‘political’ manoeuvring includes general strategies for gaining power, then Kerrigan’s and Braden’s explanation puts into perspective the Jonsonian trio’s Machiavellian exploits: “Politics in Machiavellian practice is pre-eminently a matter of the impression one makes on others, and the Prince’s central resource – more fundamental than physical prowess or mastery at arms – is his ability to manage that impression at will” (57).

Our three protagonists are able to adopt not only different physical disguises, but also the very personality to suit each contingency as it arises, and this under the most trying circumstances and within the tightest of time constraints. The impressive rapidity with which different roles are assumed, and the ability to juggle the numerous balls they have set in motion,

\(^1\) Again, Greenblatt’s argument in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* is particularly relevant in this regard.
demonstrate the quick-wittedness of the trio. This ability seems to epitomise the Machiavellian “Prince’s essential Kunst as the art of theatrical performance, the ability to be wholly convincing in any number of assumed roles” (Kerrigan and Braden, 58). Again, this chameleon trait fits with Machiavelli’s philosophy of self-knowledge, for it demonstrates the ability to assess the circumstances accurately, and is testimony of the trio’s preparedness to adjust and adapt their conduct according to shifting exigencies.

Both the characteristic of astute appraisal based on immediate contingencies and that of versatile self-revision are also specific strengths recognised by many occult philosophers. Richard Clever is clear in his endorsement of these professional assets. Thus he praises the wise and learned ‘Phisition’, or alchemical adept, who

cometh to divers estate of men of severall maners, severall education, and of severall appetites, hazarding his credite to be praised or dispraised among them, is like a swift ship, pearcing many blustering stormes, or dangerous rockes of the sea, hardly escapeth drowning: or to a Pilgrym passing over the wide desart, compassed on every side with wilde beastes, scarsly escapeth slaying (9).

Face introduces Subtle variously as an astrologer, a necromancer in communication with familiar spirits and the Queen of Fairy, a numerologist, an expert in ‘metoposcopy’, and a pious and benevolent alchemist. Face himself takes on manifold disguises as the ‘Captain’, ‘Lungs’, the alchemist’s loyal and knowledgeable assistant, a Spaniard, and the subservient Jeremy. In addition to being endlessly adaptable, Face particularly epitomizes the Machiavellian man of prudence who recognises that power over others and
personal success at the expense of others are attained only “by ministering matter to passions, to cast a bait with a hook to draw them into their own ruin” (Soellner, 254). Face and Subtle adhere to this conviction, as illustrated by their repartee concerning the ploy to capture and turn the intractable Surly:

SUBTLE: Has he bit? Has he bit?
FACE: And swallow’d too, my Subtle.
I ha’ giv’n him line, and now he plays, i’faith.
SUBTLE: And shall we twitch him?
FACE: Thorough both the gills.
A wench is a rare bait, with which a man
No sooner’s taken, but he straight firks mad …
FACE: Aye,
If I can strike a fine hook into him, now –
The Temple-church, there I have cast mine angle.
(II.iv.1-17)

Despite the seemingly blasé strategizing, Face, like Richard Clever in The Flower of Phisicke, is not unaware of both the effort and danger that attend his role. This vigilance, too, is in keeping with Machiavelli’s counsel:

[It] should be realized that all courses of action involve risks: for it is in the nature of things that when one tries to avoid one danger another is always encountered. But prudence consists in knowing how to assess the dangers, and to choose the least bad course of action as being the right one to follow (The Prince, 79).
This insight proves to be invaluable to Face’s continued survival and to his relatively easy ‘absolution’ towards the end of the play, when his master returns unexpectedly to put a premature end to the schemes of the three tricksters. Face is swift and shrewd in his assessment of the situation and it is thanks to his cunning thinking and his quick action that he is able to turn a bad situation to his advantage. He not only manages to mollify his erstwhile companions by aiding and abetting their escape from the long arm of the law, but his ingenious appeal to Lovewit’s acquisitive nature and his show of contrition completely disarm his master. Face’s sleight of hand is so successful that no one can make any specific charge stick to him. Indeed, Lovewit, otherwise quite shrewd and perceptive, is so completely taken in by Face’s version of events that he can defend his servant against vehement accusations with a more or less clear conscience:

The house is mine here, and the doors are open:
If there be any such persons you seek for,
Use your authority, search on o’ God’s name.
This tumult ’bout my door, to tell you true,
It somewhat mazed me; till my man here, fearing
My more displeasure, told me he had done
Somewhat an insolent part, let out my house
(Belike, presuming on my known aversion
From any air o’ the town while there was sickness)
To a Doctor and a Captain; who, what they are,
Or where they be, he knows not

(V.v.26-37).

If Dol, Face, and Subtle are plausibly Machiavellian figures, how does Jonson invite us to assess their achievements? The denouement to The
Alchemist has been particularly problematical for most critics of Jonson. Many have explained the ‘untidy’ ending in terms of comic forms and intentions, which require that no one suffers greatly. However, if this is the case, then the so-called comic ending leaves the audience or reader with a distinctly un-comic aftertaste.

One way of making sense of Jonson’s blatant flouting of accepted Christian humanist principles of balance, proportion, and justice may be to see the actions and the consequences of those actions within the context of his engagement with Machiavelli. The standards of Christian humanism dictate that as a man sows so also shall he reap. Yet Jonson’s protagonists seem to get off almost scot-free, despite their dishonest, even heinous, treatment of the other characters. In terms of Machiavelli’s proposition of how the world works and how people may attain success within that world, Jonson’s ending does not seem preposterous, or even unexpected. Rather, the characters who display a measure of Machiavellian wit and self-knowledge are those who achieve the greater degree of ‘success’ within a society which calculates success according to what one has, or has acquired, and what one gets away with. Those who through lack of self-knowledge allow themselves to be gulled by their street-smart contemporaries end up the poorer for their failure to assess their world and their place in that world correctly.

However, drawing on Hawkes’s distinction between the qualitative (alchemical) and quantitative (monetary) notions of value, it becomes clear that “The joke, in the case of every character, is their misunderstanding or perversion of the true purpose of alchemy. This perversion is contrasted with real alchemy by being consistently characterised as unnatural” (157). This ‘unnatural’ aspect is most dramatically, if shockingly, represented by Mammon, as I intend to demonstrate.
Although John Cotta offers a censorious portrait of ‘Fugitives, workers of jugling wonders, Quacksalvers’, he does so with the same wide-eyed, realistic appraisal that characterises both Jonson and Machiavelli. Furthermore, his representation of the ‘false’ alchemist illumines our reading and understanding of *The Alchemist* as a ‘Machiavellian’ text as it reinforces the ‘truth’ of the denouement within the context of widespread ignorance and charlatanism:

> Amongst these men credulous mindes may see things invisible; beggars are enabled to sell gold to drinke, that want silver to eate. Aurum potable, the naturall Balsamum, the Philosophers Stone, dissolved Pearle, and the like inestimable glories and pride of Art and nature, are their professed ordinary creatures and the workmanship of their hands, in whose hands are nothing but idlenesse, theeft, and beggerie (*A short discoverie*, 34).

We have recourse to Montaigne’s essay, ‘Of the Vanity of Words’, to corroborate this contemporary perception of the power of words to manipulate the unlearned and the gullible – terms often conflated, as in Montaigne’s caustic judgement:

> [F]or the stupidity and credulity we find in the common people, which renders them liable to be handled and twisted by the ears by the sweet sound of this harmony [eloquence], without weighing it and knowing the truth of things by the force of reason: this credulity, I say, is not so readily found in an individual, who is more easily safeguarded, by good education and advice, against the influence of that poison (Bk I, Chap. 51, 298).
Cotta’s view seems to resonate with this perception of what one might call ‘linguistic alchemy’ that is exercised through the use of arcane jargon. Not only are the self-professed alchemists able to exploit the misplaced faith of the gullible, but, Cotta insinuates, they are themselves beguiled by their own illusions:

> It is strange to see how these men leaving their old occupations and mechanicall mysteries wherein they were educate, sodainely finde themselves inspired with a spirit of revelation of rare secrets, and thereby promise unto themselves and others miraculous wonders. And it is indeede true wonder to see with what agility they are able so grosly to deceive, and in the end like noble Chymists, having extracted silver out of the baser metal of idle words, in smoke they vanish, leaving behinde them the shadow of death, with those who leaving the day light of clearer understanding neglected, rashly run themselves into the mist of imposture and ignorance (34).

He provides a possible rationale for the widespread gullibility that is a concomitant to dubious alchemical practices:

> If men would consult with reason & judiciously consider; though their wonders were truly to be wondered, and worthy to exercise the wise and learned in their extrication (as they are the vanities and inanities of argute and subtill cousinages,) yet must it never be forgotten, that wonders yea and miracles themselves are solie never arguments of truth and sufficiency, but for the most part fruietes of unprofitable curiosity, deceiving the simple, amazing the multitude, and giving way and credite to untruth, cousinage and jugling (35).
The tendency of the gullible to ‘see things invisible’ is typified by Mammon, who waxes eloquent about the benefits and glories to be had by means of the philosopher’s stone. Mammon’s prolixity is a gauge of the degree of his self-deception. Bouwsma seems to suggest that types like Mammon were a commonplace within a cultural paradigm in which “Language was losing its supposed correspondence to reality; as a sign it increasingly seemed arbitrary in many areas” (37). MacFarlane and Maclean provide further insight into this linguistic phenomenon of the Renaissance:

Words are an enclosed system no longer denotative of things, but of our image of them; the same commerce applies as before, the same inflation, the same devaluation; but because the *imago rei* and not *res* is in question, words can now change, expand and take on relative values in a system linked to the passage and depredations of time (107).

Mammon’s overblown language demonstrates the excessive enthusiasm for the *imago rei* – the image or representation of the thing – to the obviation, even exclusion, of the *res*, the thing itself:

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 in more subtle angles, to disperse
And multiply the figures, as I walk
Naked between my *succubae*. My mists
I'll have of perfume, vapoured 'bout the room
To lose ourselves in; and my baths like pits
To fall into; from whence we will come forth
And roll us dry in gossamer and roses

(II.ii.41-52).

This extravagant wishful thinking and almost obscene imaginative life are not limited to the overly impressionable Mammon, but also constitute the 'soft spot' of the more wary Anabaptists, and indeed, all of the other gulls. And every one of the characters becomes a victim of the pursuit of 'false alchemy', which, according to Hawkes, "is not merely a distortion of true alchemy: it is its antithesis. Every true alchemist would have agreed that the 'multiplying' of gold was destructive if pursued as an end in itself" (154).

Machiavellian Self-Knowledge and Alchemy

Jonson’s stealthy interrogation of and experimentation with Machiavellian principles converge in the central conceit of this play: alchemy. Jonson’s choice of alchemy as the binding agent in the play is a great tactical device. Edward Partridge, in ‘The Imagery of The Alchemist’ claims that:

Though alchemy itself is a fraud, Subtle, Dol, and Face are successful alchemists in that they have found this golden secret [that people’s weaknesses can be exploited for personal material gain]. All who discover this secret – all whores like Dol, all quacks like Subtle, all shrewd rascals like Face, all unscrupulous opportunists like Lovewit – these are the true alchemists (163).

While I agree with Partridge that Jonson’s cozeners may be seen to represent ‘the true alchemists’, I am somewhat sceptical of his assessment of
alchemy itself as fraudulent. Rather, I tend to agree with Mebane’s view that
despite the condemnation of conservative thinkers who saw all things occult
as either deceptive or unreservedly demonic, the practitioners of the various
esoteric arts saw themselves as God’s representatives on earth, “motivated
by piety and love, … their purposes … consonant with those of the natural
order itself” (7). In his discussion of Robert Boyle’s Sceptical Chymist,
Lawrence Principe also emphasises that Boyle, himself a practicing
alchemist, distinguished among different categories of alchemists,
“differentiating the lower, ‘vulgar chymists’ … from the ‘Chymical
Philosophers’ or alchemical adepti” (58).

Of course, there were those who consciously and deliberately set out to
deceive – like our Jonsonian trio. However, the Great Work of alchemy
itself was considered to be both valid and valuable in the quest for
knowledge, not only about scientific and material processes, but also about
the nature and ‘mechanisms’ of human beings within the context of the
natural order. Thus Linden can say that “At its most successful, literary
alchemy has the human condition as its prime concern, but it is the human
condition as touched, or ‘worked upon,’ by recognizable aspects of the
theory and practice of the art” (24). He goes on to point out that literary
authors, including Chaucer and Jonson

used alchemy to represent the flawed nature of mankind, creating
characters corrupted less because of their involvement in alchemical
matters than by the presence of deeper evils that have led them to
this involvement … [Alchemy] may be both a cause and an effect of
human corruption, but it is more frequently a means of objectifying
the consequences of original sin than of representing evil itself (24).
In relation to Linden’s reading, it becomes credible that while Jonson certainly condemns the various human failings of avarice, ignorance, and gullibility – including the ready acceptance and entertainment of false alchemy and alchemical charlatans – he is not necessarily dismissing the underlying principles of alchemy. These principles are ideally suited to concretise, or ‘objectify’, the abstract stages of psychological and moral transformation\(^2\) which was Jonson’s averred goal as a literary artist.

Jonson’s satirical attack on social corruption and lack of self-knowledge is therefore not the same as satire directed against alchemy \textit{per se}. Rather, alchemy becomes the vehicle for Jonson’s commentary on the vices which he experienced as an unavoidable part of the social fabric. Jonson’s treatment of the social implications of avarice, charlatanism, and lack of self-knowledge does not necessarily translate into a rejection of alchemical philosophy. Just as Chaucer in the \textit{Canterbury Tales} overtly and unsympathetically satirized the corruption within the Church while firmly upholding the fundamental truths and values contained in the Church, so too, the evidence suggests, does Jonson lampoon and criticize the abuses of false alchemy while himself utilizing the foundational principles and philosophies of alchemy within his own artistic practice.

This insight serves as a qualification of Linden’s claim that in Jonson “alchemy is flatly equated with imposture [and that] Jonson refuses to consider the art and its practitioners in any other way” (151). In contrast to this view, it seems likely that Jonson must have considered the alchemical philosophy as a valid means of interrogating and conveying his own commentary on society. In fact, Linden himself testifies to this by equating Jonson the artist with the alchemist, and his literary work with the

\(^2\) As I will discuss in the following chapter, this ‘transformative’ intention is not necessarily directed towards, or bodied forth by, the characters themselves.
alchemical endeavour. He even employs alchemical criteria in his praise of “Jonson’s genius in transforming a wide range of rather conventional alchemical materials into an enduring statement on the effects of human greed and hypocrisy” (119). Linden’s alchemical analogy becomes even more marked as he claims that

Jonson is unsurpassed in the range, depth, and accuracy of his knowledge as well as in his ability to transmute this knowledge into an incisive commentary on human nature … [displaying his] extraordinary cleverness in transmuting leaden principles and methodology to golden comedy and satire while still retaining the recognizable attributes of the *prima materia* (119, 123).

An appreciation of the qualifications and nuances inherent in Jonson’s satire deepens our understanding of his seemingly straightforward character portrayals. Although Face, Subtle, and Dol are self-acknowledged con-artists and embark on their swindles in a considered and purposeful manner, there does not seem to be any conclusive textual evidence that they regard alchemy or any of the other esoteric arts as necessarily or innately spurious. On the contrary, the opening scene suggests that it was Subtle’s sincere and earnest, though unsuccessful, alchemical quest that landed him in penury and consequently led him along the shady path of the quick profit. Face seems to imply this possible sequence of events when he sneers that:

… all your alchemy and your algebra,
Your minerals, vegetals and animals,
Your conjuring, coz’ning and your dozen of trades,
Could not relieve your corpse with so much linen
Would make you tinder, but to see a fire.

(I.i.38-41)
‘True’ and ‘False’ Alchemy

This image of one so poor that he could not afford the most basic of linen underclothes calls to mind Chaucer’s Canon’s Yeoman, who bewails his reversal of fortune due to his involvement in alchemical pursuits:

There I was wont to be right fressh and gay
Of clothyng and of oother good array,
Now may I were an hose upon myn heed …
That slidynge science hath me maad so bare
That I have no good, wher that evere I fare.

(VIII, 724-6, 732-3)

Jonson was certainly aware of this description as he owned a copy of Chaucer’s works, now housed in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C. Jonson marked a significant comment by Thomas Speght, the editor of the 1602 edition of Chaucer he owned, where Speght asserts in his preface ‘To the Reader’:

this auncient Poet, that whereas diuers haue thought him unlearned, and his writings meere trifles, it should appeare, that besides the knowledge of sundrie tongues, be was a man of great reading, and deep judgement.

As Jonson was interested enough in Chaucer to annotate his works, it is also a reasonable assumption that Jonson employed the Chaucerian poetic device of embedding fundamental truths about human existence within the seeming trivia of comedy.
John Read suggests that “There is little evidence in Jonson’s play that, as alchemists, Subtle and Face were anything more than cross-talk artistes using the vocabulary of alchemy as their medium” (The Alchemist, 39). However, before Face became his ‘theatrical agent’, Subtle, like Chaucer’s Canon’s Yeoman, was one of those condemned laboriously to “blondren evere and pouren in the fir”, forever unsuccessful in his quest to “lerne multiplie” while deceiving both himself and his patrons (669-670). Read explains that these misguided, though often mercenary, ‘alchemists’ were of a different class than that of the barefaced charlatans who had no real faith in their so-called art (36). Subtle’s own self-awareness seems to suggest that he considers himself as belonging to the former category. While his practical alchemical endeavours come to nothing, the spirit of alchemy so suffuses his consciousness that he adamantly asserts his power and status as an alchemical adept when he vehemently delivers his admonition to Face:

I will teach you
How to beware to tempt a Fury again,
That carries tempest in his hand and voice.

(I.i.60-62)

According to Read, the more or less sincere alchemical practitioners, such as the Canon’s Yeoman and perhaps the erstwhile Subtle, “inspire sympathy as earnest seekers after the philosopher’s stone. Their unending labours, although arbitrary and uninformed, and usually actuated by sordid motives, were sustained by a fervent faith in the existence of a powerful transmuting agent” (The Alchemist, 29). Thus we cannot help but sympathise with the Yeoman, who declares his stubborn faith in the face of continual failure: “Yet is it fals, but ay we han good hope!” (VIII, 678).
Linden emphasises the metaphysical and spiritual aspirations of the sincere esoteric alchemists, who approached alchemy as “a devotional system where the mundane transmutation of metals became merely symbolic of the transformation of sinful man into a perfect being through prayer and submission to the will of God … a vast religious and philosophical system aimed at the purification and regeneration of [devout disciples’] lives” (8). Consequently, although Subtle fails in his practical, or material, attempt to acquire the ultimate transmuting agent, he yet asserts his confidence in the underlying principle of alchemy, which is metamorphosis of one kind or another. He thus describes his relationship with Face in terms of alchemical transformation:

Thou vermin, have I ta’en thee out of dung,
So poor, so wretched, when no living thing
Would keep thee company, but a spider, or worse?
Rais’d thee from brooms, and dust, and wat’ring pots?
Sublim’d thee, and exalted thee, and fix’d thee
I’ the third region, call’s our state of grace?
Wrought thee to spirit, to quintessence, with pains
Would twice have won me the philosopher’s work?

(I.i.64–71)

Despite Subtle’s boastful claim to have alchemised the base and apparently useless servant, making Face “fit / For more than ordinary fellowships” (I.i.72–73), Face seems to have been the mastermind behind the establishment of the ‘venture tripartite’. It was he who put in place the grand scheme of utilizing Subtle’s alchemical know-how to turn a quick profit. He reminds Subtle:
I ga’ you count’nance, credit for your coals,
Your stills, your glasses, your materials,
Built you a furnace, drew you customers,
Advanc’d all your black arts; lent you, beside,
A house to practise in –

(I.i.130-136)

While acknowledging Subtle’s extensive knowledge of the ‘black art’, Face insists on his own crucial role in the joint enterprise. He cheekily reminds Subtle:

Why, now, you smoky persecutor of nature!
Now, do you see, that something’s to be done,
Beside your beech-coal, and your cor’sive waters,
Your crosslets, crucibles, and curcurbites?
You must have stuff, brought home to you, to work on!
And yet, you think, I am at no expense,
In searching out these veins, then following ’em,
Then trying ’em out.

(I.iii.100-107).

If there is honour, or at least candour, amongst scoundrels, then Face’s alchemical analogy can be taken as an expression of a belief that the ignorant gulls are a valid form of base material. They are, therefore, to be worked on and exploited for the riches they can provide. This life-strategy is in accordance with the Machiavellian philosophy, because “In order to cope with the fickleness, avarice, and short-sighted egoism of the multitude the ruler [or, in this case, the con-artist], in Machiavelli’s view, must be not only intelligent and forceful but also a master of the arts of deceit” (Ralph, 23).
Thus, although the practice of alchemy may seem to be overtly discredited, or at least satirized, by Jonson himself, it becomes clear that he imbues his protagonists with what seems to be an intuitive grasp of Machiavellian philosophy. It is this shared conviction that gives both impetus and direction to their various ‘alchemical’ schemes. Alvin B. Kernan remarks that:

If alchemy is ever possible, the play seems to be saying, then its true powers are the wit and quickness of such clever characters as Face and Subtle, who always manage to turn a dollar somehow … turning the rough opportunities of life into pure gold … [The] triumph of alchemy [is] the wit which achieves riches and happiness by making the most of such chances as the world throws its way (28).

We should not think of alchemy, though, as only a dramatic metaphor for wit but also as an active engagement with a lively body of contemporary thought, which includes debates around natural philosophy, science, religion, statecraft, and epistemology, amongst other fields of study. In his discussion of the significance of alchemical and financial value in relation to Donne’s poetry – but which may also be seen to be applicable to this particular interpretation of Jonson’s *The Alchemist* – Hawkes argues that “the metaphysical conceit … derives its power from its firm belief in an actual as well as a figurative connection between vehicle and tenor. The poet’s ‘wit’ was conceived of as observing and expressing these correspondences rather than as inventing them” (146). If alchemy is no more than a figure for wit, then it becomes emptied of substantive meaning. Also, it is clear, if one takes seriously Jonson’s meticulous study of the nature and function of drama as a whole and his avowed commitment to corrective comedy in
particular, that he is exploring alchemical philosophy at a deeper level, or levels, than a straightforward one-on-one correlation.

The particular appreciation of the alchemical philosophy as presented in the subtext of *The Alchemist* is in keeping with the Machiavellian epistemology discussed earlier, and seems to elucidate and sustain the multi-layered alchemical resonances throughout the play. For just as the practice of alchemy represents the attempt to change base metals into superior gold, so too do the endeavours of Face, Subtle, and Dol signify their efforts to transform their circumscribed existence into an experience of power, wealth, and freedom, notwithstanding the dubious nature of their deeds. Kerrigan and Braden point out that “The Machiavellian Prince” is not necessarily or only a political or social leader, but “Renaissance man, addressing his surroundings with a new freedom from preconception, and exploiting that freedom to secure for himself a new level of power over his world” (56). Jonson allows his trio to grasp the self-liberating dimension of Machiavelli’s tenets, in that they reject the restrictive, if not reductive, moulds which both history and society seem to have cast for them.

It is perhaps this tension between, on the one hand, genuine skill and penetrating self-knowledge, and on the other, their morally questionable activities which informs and drives the action of the play and alerts us to the central alchemical process of the play. As Partridge suggests, “Perhaps the true philosopher’s stone is not the stone itself, but simply business – that is, selling the public the things it wants” (162). This proposition is given weight when one considers Hawkes’s point that “Donne, like many other writers of his age, found in the ancient art of alchemy a discourse through which he could simultaneously consider developments in the area we call ‘economic’ and conflicts in the fields we refer to as ‘psychology’ and ‘religion’” (147).
Alchemy as Machiavellism

A type of this utilitarian Machiavellism was expounded and advocated by Francis Bacon in his *Advancement of Learning*. Bacon asserts that self-knowledge divorced from the practicalities of everyday life is hollow and abortive. His prescriptions for functional and expedient self-knowledge thus adumbrate a “means to an end and not an end in itself, and they are totally secular and morally indifferent, advocating self-expansion rather than self-limitation” (Soellner, 38). This expansive ideal is rhetorically expressed by Dol, who employs an argument that develops this idea of amplification as she traces the progressive movement from their specific three-way relationship, to the articulation of the ‘venture tripartite’ as a republic (I.i.110), and then with a kind of absurd logic asserts the universal relevance of their industrious campaign:

Ha’ you together cozen’d all this while,  
And all the world, and it shall now be said  
Y’ have made most courteous shift to cozen yourselves?…  
Fall to your couples again, and cozen kindly,  
And heartily, and lovingly, as you should.

(I.i.115-141)

Dol’s speech is not merely an attempt to pour oil on troubled waters, but also serves to reinforce the underlying Machiavellian philosophy that offers a positive, almost homely, perspective on the trickery and deception that most Christian humanists would have considered to be morally inexcusable. Although Machiavellli directs his teachings particularly to statesmen and rulers, Dol seems – perhaps not unexpectedly, in light of her reference to the republic – to recognise that “divisions never benefit anyone; on the
contrary, when faction-ridden cities are threatened by an enemy force, they always fall very quickly” (73), hence her rhetorical question: “Will you undo yourselves with civil war?” (I.i.82) While, in this case, Dol focuses on the immediate internal perils of contention, all three protagonists are aware of the various external threats hanging over them like multiple swords of Damocles, and Dol’s pleadings and threats are aimed at precluding, or at least minimizing, the threat of exposure and retribution.

Dol is able to bring the other two to their senses not only by brandishing the stick of imminent danger that attends internecine hostilities, but also by holding out the carrot of possible profit that can be had by working together to realise their plans. This political, self-interested sentiment is given philosophical relevance by Ficino, who holds that:

> So powerful is the gift of unity itself and of stability that only at the lowest level of the universe does it seem to be overtaken by its opposites [multiplicity and motion]. Yet even there the gift sometimes prevails in a way, since it continually keeps the matter, which is subject to infinite plurality and change, constant in the unity of substance and order (213).

But this ideal of unity was severely compromised by insidious self-interest, traditionally blamed on the ‘original sin’ of Adam, which introduced into human history a more or less unavoidable discord. Machiavelli seems to concede the ‘fallen’ and imperfect nature of humanity. He thus refuses to focus on the ideal of unity and perfection, but rather invests his efforts in acknowledging and dealing with the reality of impaired, disjunctive, and often ‘sinful’ human nature. Although he hedges his arguments by granting that people should follow the way of virtuous intercourse with others, – if
this will allow them to realise their ends – he is also quite vehement in his warning that most people will very often find it unavoidable to cultivate a ‘bad’ nature, “which they must be prepared to follow when it is dictated by necessity” (xix). Ralph explains that “Machiavelli exalted power – even naked, brutal power, uninhibited by religious dictates or moral scruples – because this was the one reality that seemed to him effective. He recommended the use of power to whatever extent necessary … to provide stability and security” (63).

Although Jonson’s three protagonists cannot be credited with such noble ideals as ‘stability and security’, it may be argued that Face, Subtle, and Dol appreciate that they are more or less compelled – by unfavourable economic circumstances, their own desire for easy wealth, and their personal and social rank, which severely restrict their entrepreneurial options – to engage in morally questionable activities if they are to realise their goals. Even if at one level this may be taken to mean that the three characters are nothing more than mere pawns of Fate, and that their actions are purely crisis-control, Machiavelli offers the qualification that Fate alone cannot account for one’s failures or successes. Thus, he insists, “I am disposed to hold that fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, but that it lets us control roughly the other half” (85). The other characters in the play are obviously also constrained by economic and social neediness, yet, unlike our resourceful trio, they fail to adopt efficacious strategies for survival and advancement, dramatically illustrating Machiavelli’s belief in the central importance of human freedom and choice in the activities of men. Consequently, we may accept that Face, Subtle, and Dol have taken stock of their situation, and

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3 Ralph provides a gloss on the seeming fatalism which imbued many aspects of the Renaissance, attributing it to “a growing realization that men and events did not conform to the ideal, and a growing doubt as to whether man was actually free to set his own course” (249).

4 Kerrigan and Braden explain that “The precepts of Machiavelli’s treatise enable their practitioner to take control of his earthly destiny” (956).
have made a considered and deliberate choice to cultivate their so-called ‘bad’ natures in order to promote their quest for easy and quick wealth.

In this respect, the three protagonists also seem to epitomize John Cotta’s ‘True Artist’, who, like Machiavelli’s ‘wise man’, discerns and appraises the world around him, and effectively uses this knowledge to his benefit. Cotta argues:

Necessity & this uncertainty of all things, doth drive men that desire with more likely certaintie, through prudence to guide their actions unto the schoole of contemplation of the world, and of the generall revolution of all things therein, (which is true Philosophy) (115).

He explains the nature of this ‘true Philosophy’, emphasising the cardinal endeavour of observation:

[T]hat thence by long study and diligence observing to know and distinguish what is in nature, and the ordinarie vicissitude of all things, according to severall seasons, circumstances and subjects, meanes, measures, and manners variously, now true, then false; now necessarie, then casuall, now absolute in it selfe, now conditionall, with supposition, and by accident, now possible, now impossible; they may informe themselves from tried and approved knowledge (115).

But observation must be tempered by commonsense, and validated through personal experience:
[W]here with certaintie is safe to resolve, how in uncertaintie neither to neglect the least hope, nor to over-weene the best good happe: how to endeavour in that is possible, how to observe necessitie in that is impossible, providently how in cases of urgence and serious counsel, to forecast and husband occasion and opportunitie, that ill haps harme not, vain hope deceive not, time beguile not, advantage escape not, uncertaintie prejudice not, occurents prevent not that good which according to reason and the destined issue in nature, diligent endeavour may otherwise effect (116).

This, Cotta concludes, “is the summe of art and prudence” (116).

Although Face, Subtle, and Dol cannot be said to effect ‘good’ in a strictly Christian humanist sense, it is evident that they have taken stock of the ‘seasons, circumstances and subjects’ to further their ‘venture tripartite’. Like Cotta’s Artist, who adapts himself to the contingencies of ‘occasion and opportunitie’, our protagonists are diligent to keep abreast of every eventuality and emergency that arises in the course of their endeavours.

This attitude, and the actions which are the result of painstaking strategizing, are in stark contrast to Cicero’s view as stated in De Officiis. Cicero contends that rational argument is the means proper to wise men for attaining their ends, while fraud and force are appropriate only to beasts. Machiavelli, on the other hand, counters this conventional humanist tenet by asserting that “a ruler must know well how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means … One needs, then, to be a fox to recognise traps, and a lion to frighten away wolves” (61). Montaigne, too, encourages observation of the animal kingdom, especially the fox, in order to gain wisdom. Thus, “We must judge in like manner of the many wiles and stratagems that the animals
employ to defend themselves from our attacks upon them” (‘Apology for Raymond Sebond’, Bk II, Chap. 12, 452). One could try to make the case that Face, probably the foxiest of the three protagonists, is himself outfoxed by the clever disguise of Surly. However, not only does Surly’s attempt to expose the schemers fall flat, but Face has also had unquestionable success with all the other gulls that he has set out to fleece. His triumphant inventory of the day’s takings is impressive and is evidence of his fulfilment of Machiavelli’s requirement of foxiness:

Why, this’s a lucky day! Ten pounds of Mammon!
Three o’ my clerk! A portage o’ my grocer!
This o’ the brethren! Beside reversions,
And states to come i’ the widow, and my Count!
My share, today, will not be bought for forty –
(III.iii.27-31)

Face’s achievements may be attributed both to his insight into human nature and to his quick wit, which allow him to translate his knowledge into clear and precise strategy, and wholehearted deed in his ‘undercover’ work. This again accords with Machiavelli’s caveat that “foxiness should be well concealed: one must be a great feigner and dissembler. And men are so naïve, and so much dominated by immediate needs, that a skilful deceiver always finds plenty of people who will let themselves be deceived” (62). Sir Epicure Mammon epitomizes this category of gull, and is recognised as such by Surly, who exclaims with a kind of amazement:

’Heart! Can it be,
That a grave sir, a rich, that has no need,
A wise sir, too, at other times, should thus
With his own oaths and arguments, make hard means
To gull himself?

(II.iii.278-283)

Face and Subtle, of course, also recognise and appreciate this gullibility of the masses. One reason why they have managed to sustain their skilful deception is that they have learnt to put faith in the general naivety of most people, and all their little schemes are aimed at exploiting people’s desire, even need, to believe unquestioningly in the trustworthiness and generosity of others. By presenting their audiences with what they want to hear, and with supposedly great and arcane machinations, they keep the gulls subdued and impressionable, “in a state of perpetual wonder and amazement” (Machiavelli, xxiii). The ‘venture tripartite’ is certainly accomplished in mesmerizing the gulls. Moreover, they seem to adhere, even if tacitly, to Machiavelli’s admonition that “experience shows that in our times the rulers who have done great things are those who have set little store by keeping their word, being skilful rather in confusing men; they have got the better of those who have relied on being trustworthy” (61). It takes great effort and skill, but Face, Subtle, and Dol demonstrate repeatedly their ability to play fast and loose with the truth, feeling absolutely no compunction to keep their word, even amongst themselves.

However, their immediate plans depend on utilitarian collaboration, as Dol so effectively pointed out. And a prerequisite of this kind of co-operation is a clear and unambiguous distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’, as the ‘venture tripartite’ pit themselves against the rest of their society. As the action progresses, we note that they coax the odds ever-increasingly in their favour, as they play along with the almost universal trend towards gullibility. Kerrigan and Braden observe that “the main tradition of Renaissance
political drama centres on the more richly theatrical aspirations of the Machiavellian schemer, manipulating others with his changeable masks” (63). One way in which the schemers in this drama manipulate the other characters and exploit their credulity is through their compliance with Machiavelli’s discerning statement that “men pay attention to the outcome … For the common people are impressed by appearances and results” (63). Although the results are few and far between, if not altogether non-existent, our three protagonists do hold the various gulls enthralled through the appearance and promise of imminent success.

This ploy works especially well with Mammon, who is so focused on the promised result of unlimited wealth and unrestrained power that he is completely oblivious to the fact that the process seems to be suspiciously circuitous. Despite the cautionary qualms of Surly, Mammon has, through self-deception, fallen into the trap so adroitly arranged by Subtle and Face. The alchemical duo has learnt through experience that the power to determine both the beliefs and actions of others depends to a large extent on impressive claims and schemes which “display grandeur, courage, seriousness and strength” (Machiavelli, 64). In this way they have bought into and borne out the Machiavellian theory that the successful person “must contrive to achieve through all his actions the reputation of being a great man of outstanding intelligence” (77).

Reputation, however, is not necessarily the logical consequence or outward manifestation of one’s inner nature. It may be a carefully constructed and meticulously publicized façade meant to lure the unsuspecting. To this end, Face seems to be the chief architect and builder of Subtle’s apparently impressive status amongst the community of gulls. Face’s craftsmanship is especially striking in his conversation with Dapper and Kastril in which he
pulls out all the stops to promote Subtle as a lofty edifice of knowledge and ability, recognised and applauded by all. Thus, “The whole town / Study his theorems, and dispute them ordinarily, / At the eating academies” (III.iv.39-41). Indeed, so effective is Face as a spin-doctor that Subtle, a self-confessed charlatan, emerges as an unsullied and inimitable repository of secular and scientific knowledge. Face’s advertising campaign is so successful that Mammon feels compelled to defend not only Subtle’s honour as a scientist, but also his exemplary moral status, against Surly’s sarcastic indictments, by proclaiming that the alchemist,

… honest wretch,
A notable, superstitious, good soul,
Has worn his knees bare and his slippers bald
With prayer and fasting.

(II.ii.101-104)

‘Linguistic Alchemy’

It does not really matter to Mammon and to the other gulls that Subtle’s identity is obviously makeshift and becomes increasingly threadbare as the action accelerates. What matters to them – and, ultimately, to the ‘venture tripartite’ – is that they are being told what they want to hear. Unlike the modern advertising copywriter who depends almost exclusively on visual stimuli, Subtle, Face, and Dol have discovered that the most effective way of erecting and maintaining their façade as the leaders in the business of esoterica is through words – through the sway of language. Ian Donaldson notes that “Language is pictured as a weapon more than once in *The Alchemist*” (212). Subtle and Face especially are dexterous wielders of this
mighty weapon. Despite the manifest lack of concrete evidence, Face succeeds in painting a verbal portrait of Subtle that presents a man unrivalled in both knowledge and experience. This completely wins over the gulls, who are admittedly susceptible to start with. Thus Mammon can, with evident sincerity and conviction, voice his zealous approbation of Subtle:

He’s a divine instructor! Can extract
The souls of all things, by his art; call all
The virtues and the miracles of the sun,
Into a temperate furnace: teach dull nature
What her own forces are.

(IV.i.84-89).

Mammon, like all the other gulls, has been completely convinced – through words – not only to accept, but also to champion the wonder and validity of Subtle’s powers. Furthermore, although Subtle is never actually seen at work before the magic implements of his art, his grasp of the mysterious and undoubtedly awe-inspiring terminology of the arcane arts exercises a hold not only over Sir Epicure Mammon, but also over the two Protestant brethren. The verbal gymnastics displayed by Face and Subtle in their confrontation with Ananias exemplify the Machiavellian demonstration of knowledge and power necessary for exploiting the naïve:

SUBTLE: Sirrah, my varlet, stand you forth, and speak to him
Like a philosopher: answer, i’ the language.
Name the vexations, and martyrisations
Of metals, in the work.

Subtle and Face may be numbered amongst those who, according to Montaigne, have the gift of eloquence, which provides them with “facility and promptness, and so ready a repartee … that they are prepared for any emergency, whilst others, more sluggish, are never able to speak without elaborate premeditation” (‘Of Quick or Slow Speech’, Bk I, Chap. 10, 33).
FACE: Sir, putrefaction,  
Solution, ablution, sublimation,  
Cohobation, calcinations, creation, and 
Fixation.

(II.v.18-24)

After much more in the same vein of verbal onslaught, Subtle is confident that Ananias has been suitably impressed and softened up for the next step in their programme of fleecing. Thus he exults that “This will fetch ’em, / And make ’em haste towards their gulling more” (II.v.87-88). Like the example used by Machiavelli of Ferdinand of Aragon, who used the existence of entrenched religion together with people’s superstitions to advance his political cause, Subtle and Face use the mystery, wonder, and language of magic “to keep [their] subjects in a state of suspense and amazement, as they await their outcome” (77).

Kernan recognises that the play seems to pay tribute to the trio’s bold rejection of restrictive conventionalities in celebrating “the optimism and energy of man’s unconquerable mind, his limitless power to alchemise the world into the forms his imagination conceives” (Playwright as Magician, 31). Not only do Face, Subtle, and Dol attempt to project themselves into a world of their own making, a world removed from their own meagre and base milieu, but they also recognise the potential advantages to be gained by trading in the same currency. From their perspective, it is simple prudence to make a profit from selling the dream of the alchemical promise to those willing to buy into it. And as Jonson’s play so persuasively illustrates, there were many who were willing. David Riggs reports that “the flood of customers in Subtle’s establishment accurately mirrored the current level of demand for skilled magicians” (174). The only difference between the trio and their gulls is that the former appreciate the tenuousness of their
transmutation, while the gulls like Mammon seem to have a dangerously uncritical acceptance of the artificially projected ‘reality’ and permanence of the dream of the philosopher’s work. It is this crucial difference in perception that sets the trio apart as the epitome of Machiavellian exercise of knowledge and power.

Alchemy and Machiavellian Self-Fashioning

Alchemy, or the illusion of alchemical success, is thus not an end in itself, but rather provides a specific paradigm within which Subtle, Face, and Dol can explore and develop their own particular brand of the Machiavellian knowledge/power association. From within this context, they can project their own form of magic on a less knowledgeable and more naïve world. Far from being the empty shell of an elusive and illusory dream, alchemy for the protagonists becomes the clue along which they can trace their own transmutation from the base metal of mere fraudsters into the ‘pure’ gold of a Machiavellian success story. They successfully shatter the moulds of their cramped and pre-ordained existence, and manage to push back the horizons of their personal vistas. Kernan notes that Jonson’s protagonists are all satiric portraits of Renaissance aspiration, of the belief that man can make anything he will of himself and of his world, that he can storm heaven and become one with the gods, or make of earth a new paradise. Human nature and ‘remote matter’ are considered by Jonson’s characters … as endlessly plastic and therefore subject to the alchemical process (‘Base Metal into Gold’, 171).

Despite the setback of Lovewit’s unseasonable return, the trio emerge relatively unscathed, unrepentant, and unpunished. One almost naturally
presumes that with the invaluable experience gained, with the undoubted advantage of penetrating and fearless self-knowledge and the willingness to take the necessary risks within the imperfect world they inhabit, Face, Subtle, and Dol will bounce back and live to see another day. They will rise from the dross of their contemporaries to continue their pursuit and application of their philosopher’s stone.

_The Alchemist_ may be seen as a kind of nexus in which Machiavellian self-knowledge, alchemical transformation, and a sense of engagement with a chaotic and unpredictable reality are intimately connected in a process of meaning-making. Both Machiavellism and alchemy become means of coping with the here and now. They become the locales in which, and out of which, the restless yet intuitive aspect of Jonson’s questing spirit can take flight from the restraints of the Christian humanist framework to explore the frontiers of self-knowledge. Notwithstanding his own efforts to subdue and control his passionate and often ambiguous impulses, it becomes apparent, when approaching _The Alchemist_ with accommodating sensitivity, that Jonson cannot be constricted by or restricted to the bounded sphere of conventional Christian doctrine, which obviously never fully satisfied his insatiable hunger for meaning and purpose. Both alchemy and Machiavellism offered him more spacious arenas for investigation. They seem to have become for him means of testing, however paradoxically and inconclusively, certain hypotheses he had about human nature and relationships. Although at a conscious level Jonson recoils from both as being contrary to Christian humanism, his obvious fascination with and knowledge of both bespeak an underlying affinity with both as possible routes to self-knowledge and to understanding the world in which that self exists.