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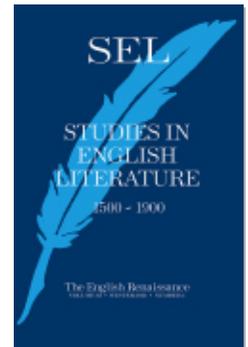
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# Ben Jonson's Orificial Comedy

JAMES YUKIKO MULDER

Famously, *The Alchemist* begins with a fart. Face, in the throes of an argument with Subtle, brandishes a vial of acid and threatens, "Believe 't, I will," to which Subtle retorts, "Thy worst. I fart at thee!"<sup>1</sup> Within the context of a play famed for its fixation on filth, fluid, excrement, and odor, we can easily imagine Subtle's inaugural fart pervading the space of the playhouse, persisting until, as Ben Jonson puts it in "The Argument," "all in fume are gone" (line 12). The play, Jonson seems to suggest, lasts as long as its odor lingers. Indeed, the play returns again and again to the comic terrain of the malodorous, the explosive, and the embarrassing. By coupling the motion of the play and the movement of the bowels in this way, the play produces an exemplary map of early modern discourses of bodily shame.<sup>2</sup> The play's comic scenes of bodily debasement are often thought to reflect an early modern social context in which one's bodily mastery figures one's corresponding position of control or power within the social body.<sup>3</sup> Bodily uncontrol, by extension, signals the threat of social disorder. Naturally, then, the anarchic chaos staged in *The Alchemist* is tinged with irrepressible fumes. Nearly the entire play takes place within the space of Lovewit's house, which has been left masterless due to plague. In Lovewit's absence, Face, the servant left in care of the vacant house, partners with Subtle and Doll, co-conspirators who join with him to outwit a panoply of characters who come to them for alchemical solutions to their various ill fortunes. Face, Subtle, and Doll make the association of bodily mastery and social mastery comically explicit: they dupe unwitting customers precisely by subjecting them to false purgative rituals that unseat them from positions of bodily

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control. In contrast, Surly, a lone skeptic among the otherwise credulous visitors to the house, declares his imperviousness to alchemical schemes by claiming to be “costive of belief,” a claim that metaphorizes his resistance to their schemes as a form of bodily continence (II.iii.26).

Cultural anxieties about unruly bodily products and openings are, of course, also commonly associated with the threat of disorderly or illicit sexual desire. Excremental, eruptive, and leaky bodies figure forms of sexual incontinence that threaten to destabilize a patriarchal social order.<sup>4</sup> Lovewit's return in act V therefore reestablishes his position as master of the house both by returning Face to the subordinate position of butler and by Lovewit's marriage with Dame Pliant. Face, returning to his persona as Jeremy the butler, ushers his co-conspirators out of sight as he insists,

Here  
Determines the indenture tripartite  
’Twixt Subtle, Doll, and Face. All I can do  
Is to help you over the wall, o’the back-side.

(V.iv.130–3)

Ultimately, many critics see social and sexual subordination to be collocated in Lovewit's return to the position of patriarch, as the social body finally expels the excremental taint of disorder and unsavory characters are purged via the “back-side.” Such a critical consensus aligns with Mario DiGangi's influential analysis of the play, in which he describes the ass or arse as “the bodily locus of disciplinary/sexual subordination.”<sup>5</sup> In this light, the play's “anal explosive celebration of the excremental,” as Will Stockton characterizes Jonson's plays, materializes early modern anxieties about mastery and subordination on the surface of the body.<sup>6</sup>

New methodologies in the study of early modern sexuality and philology, however, demand a reevaluation of what we may learn from *The Alchemist* about early modern anxieties regarding mastery, subordination, and bodily excrescence. Jeffrey Masten's *Queer Philologies* suggests, powerfully, that “the study of sex and gender in historically distant cultures is necessarily a *philological* investigation—in this case, a detailed study of the terms and related rhetorics that early modern English culture used to inscribe bodies, pleasures, affects, sexual acts, and, to the extent we can speak of these, identities.”<sup>7</sup> Such a study of the mutually constitutive relationship between corporeality and

language complicates the seemingly straightforward conflation of the anus with subordination or derogation, and further, affords interpretive strategies that attune us to the ways in which bodily matter resists the binarisms of mastery/subordination, activity/passivity, and even order/disorder that have previously shaped studies of early modern bodies and sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Valerie Traub's *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, too, investigates the relationship between early modern sexual language and sexual meaning to reveal early modern "strategies of 'sex talk' ... [that] tend to lead not to greater certainty, whereby words nail down sexual signification, but to the constitutive role of vagueness, imprecision, and illegibility."<sup>9</sup> By tracking the recirculation of puns and other linguistic fragments within *The Alchemist's* comic economy of language, I extend the emerging methodologies of new philology to question the implications of a prevailing critical consensus regarding Jonson's use of the orifice—most notably, the anus—as a site of disciplinary subordination. Specifically, I am interested in how such a consensus operationalizes certain methodological and theoretical assumptions about the early modern body.

Importantly, though significant scholarly attention to explosive excretory bodily matter in Jonson has produced insights into the structure of the social and the particular ways in which anxieties about bodily borders and containment reinforce social hierarchy, the critical conversation remains largely focused on the orifice's excretory functions. The anatomical passages of the play are as often stopped up as they are functioning, however, and a study of the play's orificial stoppages, blockages, interruptions, and refusals sheds new light on the disorganizing liveliness of Jonson's comic characters. The orificial blockages of Jonson's comedy, I argue, subtend the linguistic play of puns and repetition that characterizes the play's distinctive wit. The play's recycling and recirculation of waste, on the one hand, and comic language, on the other, stop up the proper functioning of the social body. The play generates its irrepressible comic momentum precisely by insisting on the zones of contradiction and discontinuity that open up in these moments of blockage or failure. Taking up emerging conversations within the field of new philology in this way enables us to explore new bodily contexts released by "those moments *when words fail*," to borrow a phrase from Traub, and to radically shift our understanding of early modern bodily rhetorics.<sup>10</sup>

## I

In the altercation with which *The Alchemist* begins, Face and Subtle spar verbally over which of them is responsible for bringing the other “out of dung,” as Subtle puts it (I.i.64), and making their now-prosperous shared enterprise in Lovewit’s temporarily vacant household possible. They trade insults, each insisting that the other would have remained mired in muck and filth if not for the formation of their partnership. Face insists,

I shall put you in mind, sir: at Pie Corner,  
 Taking your meal of steam in from cooks’ stalls,  
 Where, like the father of hunger, you did walk  
 Piteously costive, with your pinched-horn nose

.....  
 When you went pinned up in the several rags  
 You’d raked and picked from dunghills before day,  
 Your feet in moldy slippers for your kibes,  
 A felt of rug, and a thin threaden cloak  
 That scarce would cover your no-buttocks.

(I.i.25–37)

In a germinal reading of the scene, Gail Kern Paster argues that “Subtle and Face each try to set before the other’s memorializing imagination the image of an embarrassing earlier body, as if the past self-in-the-body were the inner, the naked, the irreducible self making the present construction shamefully transparent and inessential. They would reduce identity in the other to the regressive extreme of what the body inevitably and involuntarily produces and has always produced—its own excrement.”<sup>11</sup> Paster’s reading of the scene is invaluable to an understanding of gender, purgation, and their respective roles in early modern experiences of embodiment, but it elides some bodily significations that I call attention to here. There is, in fact, more to say with regard to how Face describes the memory of Subtle and its association with waste. As Face insists on his role in saving his colleague from impoverishment, the image he calls up is not one in which the salient quality of the body is its “inevitabl[e] and involuntary[y]” excretion. Rather, Subtle’s “Piteously costive” body is unable to produce. The jibe embarrasses Subtle not precisely by conjuring the image of his body’s inevitable products, but by reminding him of a time when his social and economic position was so low, he lacked even the means, as Face puts it, to “relieve [his] corpse”

(I.i.41). Indeed, the image of Subtle's past self is piteous not only because it reduces Subtle's constructed identity to the "social nullity" of the body's involuntary processes, as Paster suggests, but more precisely because that remembered body is costive, or failing to produce anything at all.<sup>12</sup> What emerges in Face's insult is an image of doubled lack: Subtle is so penniless that he can afford to consume nothing but steam, and, lacking sustenance, his body is doubly frustrated by the impossibility of evacuation.

It is true that Face's insults conjure a remembered image of Subtle that wafts the unpleasant scent of excrement in its wake, as he recalls Subtle clad in dunghill rags. The rags, however, associate Subtle with excrement only to underscore what Face has already disclosed: Subtle was perhaps reduced to smelling like it, but he was unable to produce it. The remembered image of Subtle walks the opening scene like a ghost: stopped up and penniless, he lacks a proper body. Like the rags, the other details in Face's description enumerate signs of Subtle's bodily lack. He describes Subtle's "moldy slippers," "felt of rug," and "a thin threaden cloak" which, Face insists, "scarce would cover [his] no-buttocks." Notably, Subtle's nearly uncovered rear end appears only as its own absence. That is to say, the site at which his body ought to manifest its involuntary products appears as a flattened surface rather than a productive orifice. Further, his threadbare cloak manages only just to hide from view the place where his bottom should be. The embarrassment of having his buttocks on display, then, is less the embarrassment of uncontrolled bodily production than it is the embarrassment of lacking a body in the first place. This barely hidden threat of lack that we glimpse in the first scene continues to haunt the play even as Face and Subtle's initial quarrel is cut short.

Indeed, though Face and Subtle are eager to celebrate their success, the material wealth that circulates within the play's economy is decidedly not limitless. For Katharine Eisaman Maus, the threat of scarcity that underlies *The Alchemist* evidences a structural feature of Jonsonian satire more generally. Maus writes, "The fundamental principle of what I shall call Jonson's 'satiric economy' might, anachronistically, be called the law of the conservation of matter. In the comedies and the satiric epigrams, he represents a world that contains a predetermined quantity of substance, a quantity not subject to increase."<sup>13</sup> The economy of scarcity that constrains Jonsonian comedy, Maus notes, results in the recycling and recirculation of commodities and other props among the characters of the play. Even as Face and Subtle offer

promises of limitless wealth, then, the material wealth represented onstage remains resolutely finite. No sooner has Sir Epicure Mammon pledged to deliver his pewter and brass possessions into Subtle's hands, for example, than the same objects are promised forthwith to Tribulation and Ananias. Customers and commodities alike circulate and recirculate into and out of the space of the house, and the frenetic quality of their movement is underscored by the play's faithful compliance with unities of time and space.<sup>14</sup>

The contained and even claustrophobic space of the house, too, is shaped by the play's fixation on bodily metaphors, as many critics have noted. Paster notes that in *The Alchemist* "[t]he relationship between bodily and domestic space, [and] the identification of the body with the house" operate to discipline the social body and, further, "to focus psychic attention, both positive and negative, upon the sensations of bodiliness, especially bodily boundaries."<sup>15</sup> Viewed in light of the play's sustained analogy of the house with the body, the circulation of objects and customers within the house figures the digestive movement of the alimentary tract. The frenzy of transactions, however, is never fully insulated against the digestive stoppage imaged by the specter with which the play begins: that of a piteously costive Subtle at Pie Corner.

Subtle's performance of mastery over the alchemical arts is, though perhaps assisted by the use of props and disguise, fundamentally incantatory: his gulls are not duped, ultimately, by the visual or physical proof of his work, but rather by his mystifying and masterful use of language. He employs seemingly inexhaustible lists of materials and alchemical procedures in order to convince his customers to engage his services. What appears as encyclopedic knowledge of his materials is also, crucially, a display of wit and poetic mastery. Surly, the skeptic, refers to this practice as "a pretty kind of game" designed to "cheat a man / With charming" (II.iii.180–2). Importantly, when Face reminds Subtle of his bodily lack at Pie Corner, Face simultaneously pokes fun at the failure of his linguistic mastery. Face taunts,

all your alchemy and your algebra,  
Your minerals, vegetals, and animals,  
Your conjuring, cozening, and your dozen of trades  
Could not relieve your corpse.

(I.i.38–41)

Formally, Face's taunt about Subtle's appearance at Pie Corner repeats the comical bluster of Subtle's "charming." As though the

law of the conservation of matter applies here, too, the first syllable of “alchemy and algebra” is recycled in “minerals, vegetals, and animals.” The circulation of syllables from the beginning to the ending of his nouns circumscribes a sort of sonic space, a closed loop of syllabic material. The closure of this sonic space, and the fact that only the three protagonists demonstrate sufficient wit to enter it, circumscribes the position of social mastery that sets them apart from their gulls. Adam Zucker considers the social distance created by being in on the joke to suggest, “The distances between characters who successfully manage places and materials and the characters who do not—the distances that help create wit in comedy—are shown to compete with, to collaborate with, and, at times, to overturn entirely other status hierarchies, including those organized by wealth, gender, and political rank.”<sup>16</sup> Subtle’s witty manipulation of the linguistic material of the list thus serves a dual purpose: it stands in for his purported manipulations of the alchemical materials he summons, and it generates the social distance that structures the social hierarchy of the play.<sup>17</sup> There is, I propose, a third and related effect of Subtle’s alchemical language, which is that the circulation of syllabic material resonates in the digestive movements of the satiric economy. Subtle’s abject specter at Pie Corner, after all, suffers not only a digestive blockage but a linguistic one as well: neither Subtle’s no-buttocks nor his “conjuring, cozening, and ... dozen of trades” can produce the relief of his corpse. His lack of a body thus coincides with the failure of the spell-like power of “charming” Subtle uses to produce his gulls’ desired objects.

The piteously costive, disembodied Subtle who is conjured to walk “like the father of hunger” through the opening scene of the play contrasts starkly with his later, much livelier incarnation—a contrast marked with the exuberant assertion of “I fart at thee.” His reincarnation replaces no-buttocks with a “speaking asshole,” which, by farting at will, boasts of Subtle’s renewed control over his body’s products.<sup>18</sup> The speaking hole opens to release Subtle from the immobilized state of having no-buttocks; it signals his propulsion into a renewed world of meaning, a world in which his conjuring can relieve his corpse. Yet, though the cooperation of mouth and anus announces the revivification of Subtle’s language, I would argue that the doubled utterance puts an irreducible and crucial wrinkle into Subtle’s purported mastery. Subtle’s spoken “I fart at thee” reiterates the fart; it is a linguistic addition that suggests that the orifice is not fully able to speak for itself. The doubled utterance introduces a split within the renewed bodily

coherence it has been taken to imply. At once excessive and insufficient, the utterance of the fart is split from itself.

## II

Putting Jonson's bodily language under pressure in this way complicates the organizing frameworks of mastery and un mastery, control and uncontrol, that have subtended previous studies of Jonsonian comedy and early modern bodily language more broadly. Alenka Zupančič's *The Odd One In* provides an especially useful analytic lens for such a study of the tensions between *The Alchemist's* economies of language and waste. Zupančič's theory of comedy is attuned to "interruptions, punctuations, discontinuities, [and] all kinds of fixations and passionate attachments" that, I argue, cannot fully resolve into the kind of positional clarity that is implied by certain prevalent figures of social and sexual subordination.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as it works through the fragmentation and recirculation of Subtle's alchemical language, the dizzying linguistic play of *The Alchemist* animates irreducible zones of contradiction and discontinuity that, I argue, disrupt the conceptual categories that tend to organize our understanding of early modern bodily contexts. These disorganizing discontinuities persist in the lively linguistic play with which Face, Subtle, and Doll ply their customers. One such customer, Abel Drugger, requests a sign for his shop to guarantee success. Subtle describes a series of images he envisions for Drugger:

SUBTLE.           He first shall have a bell, that's Abel;  
And by it standing one whose name is Dee,  
In a rug gown; there's D, and rug, that's Drug;  
And right anenst him, a Dog snarling "er"—  
There's Drugger, Abel Drugger. That's his sign.

.....  
FACE. Abel, thou art made.

(II.vi.19–25)

Maus notes that the sign-making scene demands the recycling of materials that characterizes Jonson's satiric economy. She writes, "Subtle takes a name that suits its druggist owner perfectly, splinters it into meaningless bits, and then recompiles the scraps into a bizarre and fortuitous array."<sup>20</sup> Subtle's operation on Drugger's name treats the matter of language as interchange-

able with the matter of Mammon's brass and pewter—as material that can be recycled to generate profit. Drugger's sign, like the rebus Sigmund Freud describes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, provides an image that fails to cohere into a pictorial whole. The fragmentary image that remains nonsensical in the visual register is justified, or made sense of, by the “poetical phrase” that the rebus translates.<sup>21</sup> The final product, Face claims, will prove “a thriving sign” (II.vi.7). Here again, Subtle's alchemy grants a kind of vitality to the material that he recycles; and further, the sign is animated *by* the very figurative operation that “splinters it into meaningless bits.”

Drugger has it made, then, because he has been made: the pieces of his name have been reassembled into an image that both promises a thriving business and stands in for Drugger himself. Subtle asserts this twice: “There's Drugger, Abel Drugger. That's his sign.” Such a decisive claim might seem comical in part because the strained metonymies that intervene between the name and the image constructed to represent that name, of course, verge on the absurd. From a Zupančičean perspective, however, sheer absurdity does not fully account for the comic structure of the scene. Zupančič suggests that a comic scene stages “the impossible sustained encounter between two excluding realities,” which she likens to the sides of a Möbius strip.<sup>22</sup> Zupančič writes, “The *intrusion of the other side*, which is one of the most common comic procedures, is not simply about the other side undermining, even destroying, this side. Although this destruction may occur at some point, it never constitutes the heart of a comic scene. The first and the main comic purpose of the intrusion of the other side lies in what it enables in terms of juxtaposition of the two sides, their contemporaneity, their ‘impossible’ joint articulation.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it is not the case that Subtle's translation of Drugger's name simply gives way to nonsense. Rather, Subtle's doubled assertion of, “There's Drugger,” on the one hand, and, “That's his sign,” on the other, insists on the “thriving” synonymy of Drugger's name and his sign. Their joint articulation enfolds Subtle's meaningless, fragmentary syllabic translations into the production of an impossible synonymy.

Mammon, one of the most memorable of the gulls, also voices a desire for an image in which he sees himself, though where Drugger's aims are purely economic, Mammon elaborates grandiose descriptions of the erotic pleasures he will be able to afford when he has procured the philosopher's stone:

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.

(II.ii.41–8)

Mammon's desire to effect the proper "Cut" of his mirrors bespeaks a desire to replicate the images of himself and his partners perfectly and indefinitely. In addition, he peruses an imagined panoply of erotic images as though to insist on his own discerning taste. He differentiates his preferred scenes of desire by claiming that they possess more immediacy and liveliness than mere cold imitations. Mounting pictures from Elephantis alongside reflections of his own erotic acts, Mammon articulates a fantasy of closing the gap between imitation and life, or of endowing imitations with life. In contrast to the production of Drugger's sign, which is a figurative, fragmentary image of Drugger's name, Mammon produces a fantasy of surrounding himself with representations of embodied acts that are so perfect as to transcend cold imitation and take on a life of their own. Mammon visits his life-giving fantasy upon another imagined body when he avers:

I'll make an old man of fourscore a child  
 . . . . .  
 Nay, I mean  
 Restore his years, renew him, like an eagle,  
 To the fifth age; make him get sons and daughters.

(II.i.53–6)

Here, Mammon imagines the generative motion of his own "mak[ing]" as at once restorative and reproductive. As when he imagines the erotic images of Elephantis to be more lively than those of Aretine, Mammon imagines generating life as the re-embodiment of a lost past state of wholeness. Importantly, for Mammon, the body to which life has been fully restored registers as a coherent image. Mammon's fixation on perfect wholes avoids, by virtue of remaining in the register of pictorial images, the fragmentation and linguistic play that endows Drugger's sign with, to recall Maus's phrase, "bizarre and fortuitous" vitality.

Subtle underscores the contrast by offering a variation on the very theme that so fascinates Mammon: reproduction. As he explains the alchemical process of making gold from other metals, Subtle argues,

Nor can this remote matter suddenly  
*Progress* so from extreme unto extreme  
 As to grow gold and leap o'er all the means.  
 Nature doth first *beget* th'imperfect; then  
*Proceeds* she to the perfect. Of that airy  
 And oily water, mercury is *engendered*.

(II.iii.155–60, emphasis added)

As Subtle describes it, the material transformations wrought by alchemy rely on a kind of genealogical production in which the perfect is begotten from the imperfect. In contrast to Mammon's visions of return and recovery, Subtle's metaphorical figures mount a narrative of progression. In the same vein, Subtle also insists that each object to be transformed already contains the thing it becomes within it, just as an egg "is a chicken *in potentia*" (II.iii.134). Subtle's figurative narrative of reproduction tells a circular story of transformation in parts, while Mammon eschews figurative fragmentation in favor of a literally reproductive fantasy of perfect reduplication. Mammon's fantasies of giving life, too, fail to thrive with the comic vitality that animates Subtle and Face's alchemical incantations. The play makes a fool out of Mammon as, despite his fervent belief in his own beneficence, he succeeds only at "creating spurious abundance."<sup>24</sup>

Mammon's expansive, appetitive mood differs starkly from the demeanor of his companion, Surly. Throughout a discussion of Mammon's possessions, which Mammon intends to have transmuted into gold, Surly remains skeptical:

MAMMON. Then I may send my spits?

SUBTLE. Yes, and your racks.

SURLY. And dripping-pans and pot-hangers and hooks,  
 Shall he not?

SUBTLE. If he please.

SURLY. To be an ass.

SUBTLE. How, sir!

MAMMON. This gent'man you must bear withal.  
 I told you he had no faith.



In the absence of Subtle's purification and progression metaphors, Surly's list insists, all that is left are "terms / Whereon no one o'your writers 'grees with other." Without consensus, that is, Surly sees only the absence of sense. For Surly, the multiplicity of meanings that constitutes the language of alchemy can only amount to no meaning at all; alchemy's multiplicity is antithetical to truth, which Surly conceives of as unitary or singular. Surly replaces Subtle's stylistic tendency toward repeated syllables and internal rhyme with the repeated use of "your"—which is to say, he reiterates a singular, unchanging syllable to contrast the fragmentation and reappropriation that characterizes Subtle's poetic play.

In Surly's delivery, the rhetorical repetition becomes a way of disavowing the language he parrots. He circumscribes his own knowledge of alchemical ingredients by attributing ownership to Subtle, thereby cordoning off alchemy's nonsense as the sole property of the Other. The overflow of nonsense terminology, Surly claims, threatens to "burst a man," which refigures alchemy's untrustworthy multiplicity as a threat to the coherence of the body. Costiveness thus expresses Surly's unwillingness as a stoppage or blockage of the bodily circulations that structure the Jonsonian comic economy. Even as the figure of costiveness refers to Surly's lack of belief, rather than a literally embodied lack, the metaphor of being stopped-up describes his refusal to participate as a refusal to be gulled, or stuffed, or penetrated. In order to maintain the closure and impenetrability of his body, Surly refuses to enter the world of Subtle's "strange ingredients" (or, perhaps more to the point, to allow it to enter him). To do so would be to risk "burst[ing]," or puncturing the bodily coherence Surly anxiously maintains. Indeed, the word "costive" is used repeatedly in reference to Surly, and the reiteration of Surly's lack becomes a passionate attachment or repetition compulsion in its own right.

Zupančič describes "the way in which comedy manages to stretch the momentariness of the short circuit, how it manages to *faire la comédie*, to 'make a (whole) scene' out of this structural moment, by not simply letting it go, by insisting on it 'beyond reason,' and exploring it from different angles ... by refusing to 'cut the comedy.'"<sup>26</sup> The movement "beyond reason" that structures comedy for Zupančič describes a crucial relation between Surly's costive logic and Subtle's response to Surly's mockery. Surly articulates a unitary logic of truth, within which the multiple meanings of dissonant alchemical texts can only signify

nonsense. Subtle, however, reunifies the multiplicity of meaning Surly protests when he replies, "And all these named / Intending but one thing, which art our writers / Used to obscure their art" (II.iii.198–200). The truth of alchemy, according to Subtle's calculus, emerges in its doubled articulation—or, in the mystifying gap between the two "art[s]" he describes. Rather than denying Surly's claim altogether, Subtle keeps the comedy going by agreeing that the logic of alchemy fails to cohere and, further, by suggesting that it makes sense anyway.

Surly voices skepticism in the form of snide asides throughout Face and Subtle's negotiations with Mammon. He positions himself as an aloof commentator rather than a participant in the exchange. When Subtle muses, "Th[e] work wants something," Surly is quick to announce, in an aside, his own foreknowledge of the request Subtle is about to make (II.iii.70). Surly declares, "Oh, I looked for this. / The hay is a-pitching" (II.iii.70–1). He continues to mock Mammon as Mammon offers money to supply what's missing from the formula for the philosopher's stone. "[B]e cozened, do," Surly comments derisively (II.iii.94). In finding confirmation of his suspicions—namely, that Face and Subtle aim to trick Mammon into giving them more money—Surly is happy to avow that he was "look[ing] for" it all along. Surly's presumption of being onto Face and Subtle's deception thus supports his conviction that he has fully mastered the Other's desire and his own desire at once: he finds what he "looked for" by having already known what to look for in the first place. For all his efforts to stop the funny business, that is, Surly is nevertheless dragged along, like Mammon, by his relentless effort to confirm what he claims already to know: that, as he says, "this is a bawdy house" (II.iii.226).

Surly's steadfastness ultimately does not win him a position of social mastery. In the final act of the play, Lovewit wins the hand of the widow Surly had hoped to woo, which Lovewit attributes to the fact that Surly "did nothing" (V.v.54), while Lovewit took unhesitating action. Lovewit mocks, "What an oversight / And want of putting forward, sir, was this!" (V.v.54–5). Stopping short instead of "putting forward," Surly fails in his various attempts to outwit the practitioners of false alchemy and to reassert coherence and order. His foresight, Lovewit points out, is an "oversight," which actually prevents him from seeing the machinations within the house he has been scrutinizing all along. For all that, Surly provides a straight man in contrast to which the extravagant desires of the other characters appear all the more extravagant,

and even as he repudiates the money changing hands and the illusions of luxury that sustain the motion onstage, Surly is unable fully to exempt himself from the comic machinery of the play. He appears, rather, to be the biggest fool of all by being the most affixed to the consistency and coherence of his own character. Surly's unshakeable belief in his own foreknowledge of alchemy's duplicity, in other words, not only fails to fortify him against being gulled, but furthermore ensures his association with Subtle's costive specter. Such an association marks, to borrow a phrase from Zupančič, "precisely the point at which the subject is pinned to the Other, where she is pinned to the lack in the Other by her own lack."<sup>27</sup>

### III

Though, as I mention above, the chaotic plot of *The Alchemist* might seem to be neatly contained in the final act, I close here by suggesting that the discontinuities that structure the play's bodily language continue to interrupt its seemingly tight closure. Throughout the play, the dramatic motion of *The Alchemist* is largely comprised of interruptions and intrusions, usually by unexpected or ill-timed visitations by clients at the front door. Subtle and Face are so frequently put out of sorts by their clients' arrivals that the play gives the impression that the narrative proceeds only as a consequence of the very impossibility of a scene functioning smoothly. No character is more thoroughly and dramatically thwarted by the play's constant interruptions than Dapper, a clerk who comes to the house in search of a familiar spirit to help him at horseracing. In act III, Dapper's quest to meet the Queen of Faery and, from her, gain the familiar he seeks, leads him to follow Face and Subtle's elaborate instructions for a ritualistic purification of his body. After Dapper complies, Paster argues, he is finally "destined for the privy because Face and Subtle have already reduced him to a human waste product—the whole become the fecal part."<sup>28</sup> Dapper's unfortunate fate draws on "the identification of the body with the house," as Paster suggests, insofar as Dapper's body is reduced to bare abject material and subsequently excreted by the house-cum-body.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, from the perspective of the affects and abjections that structure the discourse of bodily shame, Dapper's banishment to the privy might appear to be the natural telos of the series of mortifying bodily exercises he is made to endure. Yet such a reading does not fully account for the way in which Dapper's relocation to the

privy is not a predestined outcome of his gulling. Rather, Mammon's arrival at the door interrupts the false ceremony, and Face, Subtle, and Doll are made to improvise. If Dapper can be said to be "destined" for the privy, then, he only fulfills that destiny because an accidental, improvised detour produces his destination.

Reconsidering the preordination of Dapper's descent into the privy provides an opportunity to reopen the temporal closure that produces Dapper's destination as his destiny. Within an organizing social logic that rewards self-possession and self-mastery, Dapper's eager consent to Face and Subtle's bodily manipulations appears to take Dapper's body out of his control in a way that reduces him to disembodied parts. Mammon's knock at the door is an entirely unwitting intrusion which, paradoxically, brings about the fate that retroactively appears as the inevitable culmination of the bodily embarrassments that precede it. In other words, it is a moment of failed closure, an unwitting interruption by the Other who demands a change of scene, which induces the downward digestive movement that deposits Dapper in the privy.

Further, to read Dapper's movement into the privy as the sign of his primarily anal or excretory relation to the house is to neglect the scene's emphatic interest in the opening of Dapper's mouth. Upon Mammon's arrival, Face, Subtle, and Doll resolve to "lay [Dapper] back awhile / With some device" (III.v.56-7). Subtle promises Dapper that the Queen of Faery, played by Doll,

has sent [him],  
 From her own private trencher, a dead mouse  
 And a piece of gingerbread to be merry withal  
 And stay [his] stomach, lest [he] faint[s] with fasting.  
 (III.v.64-7)

Even so, Subtle urges Dapper not to eat the gingerbread until the Queen of Faery calls for him. This directive seems in keeping with the Queen of Faery's litany of demands, which have included other forms of purportedly purifying self-deprivation. Subtle assures him, "If you could hold out till she saw you, she says, / It would be better for you" (III.v.68-9). Permitted neither to break his fast nor to faint from his lack of food, Dapper is meant simply to "hold out." The gingerbread thus holds Dapper's body in abeyance; the closure of his scene is suspended as the gingerbread serves both to temper and to amplify his craving.

In the negotiation of Dapper's detour, Face then engineers a pun that extends the figural relation between Dapper's body and



the house, the subsequent banishment of the rogues—save for Face, who returns to his position as butler—and the marriage of Lovewit to Dame Pliant, all of which might invite us to conclude that, as Eggert says, the scene has shifted; the game is up. One further interruption, however, suggests that though alchemy's charm wears off when we are no longer confined to the space of the house, the comedy's linguistic play is not yet through. Upon Lovewit's return, the succession of knocking, clamoring people at the door is not sufficient to convince Lovewit that his house has been used in his absence. The cacophony, in fact, merely incites Lovewit to marvel, "The world's turned Bedlam" (V.iii.54). Face, now clothed as Jeremy the butler, attempts in spite of the crowd to assure his master that "the doors were never open" in weeks (V.iii.39). It is not until Dapper, long since forgotten in the privy, calls out from within the house that Lovewit finally calls an end to Face's prevarications. The illusion of the house's closure is finally punctured, then, not by the others knocking at the front door, but by Dapper's intrusion from within.

When scolded for eating his gag, Dapper argues, "The fume did overcome me, / And I did do't to stay my stomach" (V.iv.5–6). In Dapper's repetition of the word "stay," the pun outlives the actual gingerbread, which, Dapper explains, "crumbled / Away [in his] mouth" (V.iv.1–2). That the gingerbread pun is sustained in this way recalls Zupančič's "intrusion of the other side." Zupančič suggests that while a momentary gag or joke may "[display] the nonrelation between two linked facets of reality ... comedy proper" sustains the "structural moment" of the pun by insisting upon it, or refusing to let it go.<sup>31</sup> As the gingerbread crumbles, so too does the harmonious cohabitation of the two punning purposes of the stay: to quiet Dapper's stomach on the one hand, and to keep the house quiet on the other. Once put to use in service of the former, it cannot do the latter. What the comic interruption of one figural facet into the other "produces in place of this imaginary Unity is a short circuit between the two facets which involves a comical decomposition of the Unity."<sup>32</sup> Dapper and the house, both seemingly contained, are undone by the comic split that opens up within the pun: the fume of the privy enters and discomposes Dapper's stopped-up body, and he in turn punctures the house's semblance of orderly closure. Instead of keeping conflicting plot-lines from crossing, Dapper's stay in the privy exposes the intrusion of one figural level onto the other. Pace Eggert, the linguistic play that generates the unrelenting energy and motion of the comedy persists in excess of the command of

the individual protagonists. Though act V brings Subtle, Face, and Doll's alchemical enterprise to an end, the recurrence of the pun sustains the linguistic malleability that animates the comedy as a whole. Neither the space of the house nor the reorganization of the social body is fully and finally insulated from the structural short circuit of the play's comic language, which persists in stopping up the smooth functioning of the social body.

Thus, though previous criticism has tended to read *The Alchemist* as a closed or tightly controlled narrative, within which unruly bodies are disciplined, the excremental taint of disorder is purged, and the illusion of Subtle's imaginative "charming" is punctured, the interpretive clarity afforded by such a reading risks collapsing the irreducible multiplicity of bodily movements available in the text. As I have argued here, a more expansive approach to Jonson's bodily comedy affords new opportunities to consider the bodily eruptions of the play alongside the linguistic fragmentation and recirculation that animates the comedy. The disciplinary and comic role of the excremental in Jonson yields new contexts when considered in this light, as the play's economy of waste opens onto zones of contradiction and incoherence that disrupt binary rhetorics of mastery and subordination, order and disorder.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson, "The Alchemist," in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, gen. ed. David Bevington, ed. Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Eric Rasmussen (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), pp. 861–959, I.i.1. Subsequent references to *The Alchemist* are from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line numbers.

<sup>2</sup> As Bruce Thomas Boehrer explains, "Jonson's preoccupation with excretory processes should arguably be viewed as culturally paradigmatic rather than individually neurotic" (*The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal* [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1997], p. 14).

<sup>3</sup> Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture 21 (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997). See also Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Paster, chap. 1, "Leaky Vessels: The Incontinent Women of City Comedy," pp. 23–63. See also Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> DiGangi, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Will Stockton, *Playing Dirty: Sexuality and Waste in Early Modern Comedy* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Masten, *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare's Time*, Material Texts (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Masten, chap. 6, "Is the Fundament a Grave? Translating the Early Modern Body," pp. 177–90.

<sup>9</sup> Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, Haney Foundation Series (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 176.

<sup>10</sup> Traub, p. 176.

<sup>11</sup> Paster, p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> Paster, p. 146.

<sup>13</sup> Maus, "Satiric and Ideal Economies in the Jonsonian Imagination," *ELR* 19, 1 (Winter 1989): 42–64, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Ian Donaldson notes, "The action of *The Alchemist* is played out within strict limits both of time and space ... The acting area itself ... is confined: no use is made of the inner rooms or upper stage for acting purposes, allowing for a concentration of effect" (*Jonson's Magic Houses: Essays in Interpretation* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997], p. 74).

<sup>15</sup> Paster, pp. 149–50.

<sup>16</sup> Adam Zucker, *The Places of Wit in Early Modern English Comedy* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> For more discussions on the spatialization of social hierarchy in and, as the space circumscribed, by witty exchange, see Lorna Hutson, "Liking Men: Ben Jonson's Closet Opened," *ELH* 71, 4 (Winter 2004): 1065–96. See also Michelle O'Callaghan, *The English Wits: Literature and Sociability in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Boehrer, p. 150.

<sup>19</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, Short Circuits (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Maus, p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), p. 296.

<sup>22</sup> Zupančič, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> Zupančič, p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> Maus, p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Surly goes so far as to imagine how he would punish himself if he were to allow Subtle's tricks to work on him: he would engage a prostitute to relieve herself on his eyes, which he imagines as the bodily site of his imagined cozening. He claims, "if my eyes do cozen me so ... I'll have / A whore shall piss 'em out next day" (II.i.43–5). Paster notes, "He hypothetically constructs his own self-shaming ritual as the consequence of failing in cognitive self-control and shrewdness" (p. 150).

<sup>26</sup> Zupančič, pp. 65–6.

<sup>27</sup> Zupančič, p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> Paster, p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> Paster, p. 149.

<sup>30</sup> Katherine Eggert, *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), pp. 224–5.

<sup>31</sup> Zupančič, p. 65.

<sup>32</sup> Zupančič, p. 65.