Moving from the genres and settings of the country house poem and county chorography, with which the first two chapters have been primarily concerned, we now consider the distinctive architecture of early modern London in two roughly contemporary texts that are rarely paired: John Stow’s *Survey of London* (1598) and Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (1610). Different as Stow’s meticulous history is from Jonson’s raucous comedy, the two texts help to illuminate aspects of each other and of early modern London architecture. First, each text relies on a historical sense of architecture’s value, and taken together, the two allow us to see the particular challenges that the architecture of early modern London presented to the antiquarian modes of architectural interpretation exemplified in the *Britannia* and, very soon afterward, in Jonson’s early country house poem “To Penshurst” (c. 1612). In the country house narrative, architecture is frequently used to generate stories of ancestral continuity and social stability, culminating in the celebration of an aristocratic or genteel owner’s identity and legitimacy. Translated to the architecture of the early modern capitol, however, this historical approach to architectural writing produces a very different effect. Narratives of London architecture result in a sense of what Andrew Griffin has called “diachronic fragmentation.” Continually disrupted, dismantled, and re-assembled, these stories point far more consistently toward change and instability than toward continuity or order. Stow discovered in the disordered cityscape the materials for a work that has often been called nostalgic or elegiac. For Jonson, the incongruity and volatility of his urban setting produced comic possibilities. In this way, architecture can be seen as contributing to an effect Jean E.
Howard describes as the “intimate synergy . . . operating between London and the early modern commercial theater.”

Second, Stow’s Survey enables a new way of understanding Jonson’s architectural setting. Critics have frequently noted that in The Alchemist location is everything, and Lovewit’s house has been admired as both a virtuoso imposition of the neo-Aristotelian unities and a reflection of the theater that housed this imagined space. The house is twice referred to as being located in the “Friars”: once in the opening quarrel between Subtle and Face and again in Act 4, when Sir Epicure Mammon laments that a wealthy and beautiful gentlewoman (humorously played by Doll Common) should occupy an obscure “nook . . . of the Friars.” Among others, F. H. Mares, R. L. Smallwood, and Ian Donaldson have pointed out Jonson’s cleverness in these allusions; Blackfriars was the name of both the theater and the neighborhood where the play was probably first performed, increasing, in Smallwood’s words, “the audience’s sense of involvement and immediacy.” At the same time, critics note, the suggested identity of house with theater infuses the setting with the capacity for wild transformation. Donaldson goes so far as to characterize the house as “magic”; it is “capable of being whatever people most want it to be.”

I argue that we might equally see Lovewit’s house as a representative London building of circa 1610. Unexpected similarities between the Survey and The Alchemist reveal that as much as “To Penshurst” is a country house poem, The Alchemist is a city house play. As the setting for a play performed in a theater that was itself a converted monastery, Lovewit’s house is not only a meta-theatrical or dramaturgic device but a conscious appropriation of London’s material architectural features in the post-Reformation period. It is this appropriation that Stow helps us to perceive. Reaching back to the models of Leland and Camden, the Survey describes architecture in a way that expounds its connections to human history and social legitimacy. In addition to telling us what London buildings looked like then, Stow demonstrates the breakdown of traditional formulations of identity, as constituted at the intersection of architecture, history, and land.

In The Alchemist, this disintegration of the association between person and place produces new ways of imagining legitimacy and identity. As Lovewit retreats to the margins of the play, so does the social order that depended on his presence. The house is no longer an occasion for the celebration of stable tenure and genteel identity, and Lovewit no longer provides a human culmination for architectural history. As antiquarian narratives fall apart, the genteel household is replaced by the alchemical laboratory, and ancestral histories are supplanted, in part, by alchemy itself. The product, as well, of strategic distillation and suc-
cessive stages of generation, the alchemical process promises a new culmination, which, if realized, would enable the legitimization of an entirely new social hierarchy. Presumably, if the tricksters actually succeeded in creating the philosopher’s stone, they would no longer need to fear Lovewit’s return.

While critics have often noted Jonson’s pervasive interest in architecture, they have found it difficult to reconcile its manifestation in “To Penshurst” with the architectural setting of The Alchemist; and despite the two works’ proximate dates of composition and the fact that both were dedicated to members of the Sidney family, few studies have considered the two works side by side. Stow’s Survey evinces an antiquarian influence on The Alchemist that resembles the influence of antiquarian architectural interpretation on the country house poem. Also, the Survey helps to explain how a common view of architecture can contribute to two such different works. Each work appropriates features of its setting, but “To Penshurst” affirms and exploits the conventions of country house historiography while The Alchemist, like London architecture itself, exposes that historiography’s failures and limitations.

Many recent studies of early modern London have amply described the dramatic social, demographic, and topographical changes in the city during this period. John Schofield, in particular, has extensively investigated the impact of the dissolution and the resultant land sales on the built environment. In the Priory of Christ Church, Aldgate, Schofield sees an especially memorable example. Following the monastery’s dissolution in 1531, the property was sold to Sir Thomas Audley, who tore down much of the old church and sold off the stone at very cheap rates. The property then passed, through marriage, to Audley’s son-in-law, Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, who converted the remaining buildings piecemeal to his own “mansions and . . . outbuildings,” along with a separate house “called the Ivy Chamber” and an assortment of “smaller tenements,” accompanied by “fireplaces, ovens, and privies.” This new growth was all “grafted” onto the architecture of the old building, with parts of the nave, choir, walls, arches, and windows visibly remaining. “Here,” Schofield speculates, “perhaps John Stow, who lived nearby, looked in as he collected material for his Survey of London.” Medieval skeletons were thus incongruously fleshed out with the projects of enterprising new owners.

Schofield’s investigations suggest that this transformative effect of the Reformation was particularly visible in London architecture, with its more compressed and numerous population and proximate mixture of social classes. As Vanessa Harding has shown, population growth exerted its own pressures on London’s built environment, producing other forms of haphazard and unsystematic archi-
tectural clutter, as it manifested itself in “divided houses, higher buildings, and the building-over of back plots.” Further, “in the immediate fringe beyond the walls, development took the form of closes, narrow, blind alleys onto which a dozen or more dwellings opened.” This seems to be the sort of disorder King James sought to remedy in proclamations of 1605 and 1611, which commanded that all new buildings be constructed of brick or stone, because of their superior fire resistance and the attractive front they presented to the street. The proclamations express special regret over the lack of “Uniformitie” in “the foreparts and forefronts of the houses, standing and looking towards the Streets.”

These peculiar qualities of London architecture also affected its capacity to represent the social and individual identities of its human inhabitants in the way that country house literature imagined houses to do. In his 1587 *Description of England*, William Harrison rather proudly noted, claiming it as a particularly English quality, a certain architectural deceptiveness to the fronts of London’s houses: “many of our greatest houses have outwardly been very simple and plain to sight, which inwardly have been able to receive a duke with his whole train and lodge them at their ease.” In addition, the *Description* continues, “the fronts of many of our streets have not been so uniform and orderly builded as in foreign cities.” In opaque and crowded street fronts, writes Harding, “the simple relationship between house and householder . . . was undermined.” London’s architectural arrangements made it “more difficult to perceive the human community, since the spatial obscurity of such dwellings also obscured the identity of the inhabitants.”

Ian Archer adds that “the degree of population turnover weakened the associations between people and place,” while Henry S. Turner posits that “the process of urbanization was in many ways a process of interiorization, as the subjects of the city withdrew indoors into private rooms, to be glimpsed partially through windows and doorways or over a garden wall.” This social and demographic instability also made its mark on the writing that emerged about London. In both Stow’s *Survey* and *The Alchemist*, strategically composed narratives like the county chorographies attached to the country house failed to cohere; they were not easily deduced from buildings that had, themselves, been so visibly and rapidly fragmented and transformed. As Archer points out, the *Survey* “could not perform the same functions as the county chorographies (to which it owed a lot), for which a degree of dynastic continuity among local gentry families provided a more stable ‘textual community.’”

Much has been made of the nostalgia displayed by Stow in the *Survey*. This disposition is generally seen as the product of Stow’s own experience and personality. Born in 1525, he might well have lamented the loss of the medieval city;
as Patrick Collinson opines, “Old men hate change.” But Stow’s elegiac strains are not entirely the result of geriatric yearning; he also inherited certain genres and conventions from the *Britannia* and other county chorographies. To see how Stow’s models failed, or at least changed, as he translated them to London architecture, we return briefly to the *Britannia*. Camden’s description of Hexham, Northumberland, treats a type of site Stow would have known well, the converted monastery. Camden used the histories and idealized virtues of genteel families effectively to produce threads of continuity, subsuming architectural and religious change under the names of past and present patrons:

But now all the glory that it hath, is in that ancient Abbay, a part whereof is converted into a faire dwelling house, belonging to Sir John Foster Knight. As for the Church, it standeth whole and sound, save that the West end onely thereof is pulled downe: and . . . within the quire whereof, is to be seene an ancient tombe of a noble man, of that warlike family of the Umfranvills, as appeereth by his Escutcheon of Armes, lying with his legges a crosse. After which fashion in those daies were they onely enterred . . . who tooke upon them the crosse, and were marked with the badge of the crosse for sacred warfare, to recover the Holy land from the Mahometanes and Turkes.

Camden’s architectural description does indeed enfold the history of the dissolution. What was once an abbey has become “a faire dwelling house,” and the church has been partly pulled down. Still, Camden emphasizes survival, rather than loss. The present participle “dwelling” records the building’s continued occupation and use. “Dwelling house” is a common phrase in the *Britannia*, and we might perhaps hear its echo in Jonson’s “To Penshurst,” where the closing line—“thy Lord dwells”—is used to sum up the present tense vitality of Sidney’s historical and social connections to his estate. Camden marks the landscape with the identity of Sir John Foster, whose name absorbed the former “glory” of the “ancient Abbay.” Although the history is not Foster’s own, his name and tenure provide an ostensibly stable endpoint to the history of the place. Despite its partial demolition, the church “standeth whole and sound”; and its architecture is materially inscribed with the history of the Umfranvills, as heraldic representation tags it with visually encoded narratives of ancestry. Further, in the text of the *Britannia*, the effigy of the “noble man” is both literally and figuratively positioned with respect to its history. Both the attitude of the crossed legs and Camden’s verbal explanation of this detail trace the family’s origins at least as far back as the Crusades. Although he acknowledges religious and architectural conversion at Hexham, Camden keeps his usual narrative threads and themes intact.
Stow’s description of the former Augustinian monastery in Broadstreet Ward engages several of the same themes: architecture, ancestry, history, and aristocratic identity. Here, though, the effect is very different, as these elements of the story reflect the architectural incoherence of the building’s elements. In London, buildings’ history could no longer be accurately subsumed under the names of families or institutions, as architectural structures themselves had become strange anthologies that were difficult to synthesize or accurately name. In Camden’s account of Hexham, one structure neatly supersedes the other. In Stow’s narrative of the former Augustine Friars’ monastery, by contrast, the progression from one period of the building’s history to the next is far less tidy, and there is no stable culmination to its story. Jonathan Gil Harris has argued that “the polychronic elements of Stow’s London do not always resolve themselves into a temporality of supercession. . . . The past is less canceled by the present than set to work in and against it.”

Less than working directly “against” the present in this case, however, the past provides a set of strangely aligned foundations—an anthology of incongruous texts—on which the conditions of Stow’s topography rest.

This Augustinian monastery, founded in 1253, had been “surrendred” to Henry VIII in 1538, at which time it was valued at fifty-seven pounds. At least part of the complex had then been sold to the Lord Treasurer, William Powlet, who, along with his son, made disturbing modifications. The Powlet house, says Stow, was builded by the said Lord Treasurer in place of Augustine Friers house, cloysters, and gardens, &c. The Friers Church he pulled not downe, but the West end thereof inclosed from the steeple, and Quier, was in the yeare 1550, granted to the Dutch Nation in London, to be their preaching place: the other part, namely the steeple, Quier and side Isles to the Quier adjoyning, he reserved to householde uses, as for stowage of corne, coale, and other things, his sonne and heyre Marques of Winchester sold the Monuments of noble men there buried in great number, the paving stone, and whatsoever (which cost many thousands) for one hundred pound, and in place thereof made fayre stabling for horses. He caused the Leade to be taken from the roofes, and laid tile in place, which exchange proved not so profitable as he looked for, but rather to his disadvauntage.

Here, Stow does describe architecture in terms of its owners or patrons, and even of ancestry and inheritance, but the building’s history is not distilled to any simple endpoint such as the “faire dwelling house” of Sir John Foster, even though Powlet apparently inhabited part of the old monastery. In fact, the transference
of property from father to son occasions only the record of another dissolution, this time that of the building itself. Rather than documenting a mutually definitive and continuous connection between family and place, place itself becomes unstable, literally fragmented. Camden cites modifications to the church at Hexham but points out that it remained essentially “whole and sound.” At the former Augustinian monastery, Stow mentions that the church has not been entirely pulled down, only to begin a list of the many new (and relatively undignified) things it has become. While the church at Hexham encloses the arms and monumental effigy of the noble soldier, the church of the Augustine Friars is gutted of its noble names and monuments. What was once easily subjugated to the ownership of the Friars (their “house, cloyster, and gardens”) has become difficult to name at all, at least with any noun that would succinctly describe it: it is not only a dwelling house, nor is it only a church, storehouse, or stable.

In the Britannia, architecture is often understood as a form of historical record that might solidify aristocratic identity by inscribing ancestry. In this passage from the Survey, it is the aristocrat himself who foils such antiquarian interests. As the marquis sells off the traces of history, out of acquisitiveness rather than iconoclastic furor, the landowner actively violates the very connections that antiquarian methodology exploits.27 Stow’s condemnation of both iconoclasm and avarice has often been noted, and his judgments seem to apply here.28 The marquis is as offensive to Stow’s antiquarian as to his religious and moral sensibilities. It is not only that the heir cares more for revenue than for religion. He also displays no regard for architecture’s commemorative significance, and his inaccurate valuation of the church’s architectural materials—its monuments and paving stone—seems to reflect a low valuation of its historical worth, as well. While Stow, like Camden, sought to write about architecture by translating it into human history, the marquis’s enthusiasm for conversion and innovation precludes this possibility and breaks down such narratives.

In the Survey, what newly acquired buildings seem to represent to new owners is not identity or historical legitimization but fluid sources of wealth. Stow accordingly renders the marquis’s mild punishment in financial rather than moral terms: selling the lead from the roof, presumably in hope of monetary gain, “prooved not so profitable as he looked for, but rather to his disadvauntage.” From the dissolution onwards in the Survey, monasteries are often the objects of monetary transactions, with specific sums and assessments scrupulously recorded, as they are here. The Minories, for instance, which had housed the austere order of St. Clare from 1293, “was valued to dispend 418. pounds, 8.s. 5.d. yearly, and was surrendered by Dame Elizabeth Salvage, the last Abbeyes there,
unto king Henry the 8. in the 30. of his raigne, in the yeare of Christ 1539,” after which it was converted to “storehouses, for armour, and habiliments of warre, with diverse worke houses serving to the same purpose” (1.126). And the White-friars priory was replaced by “many fayre houses . . . lodgings for Noble men and others,” after being “valued at 62. li. 7.s. 3.d. and . . . surrendred the tenth of November, the 30. of Henrie the eight” (2.47). The frequent obtrusion of these cash values and assessments also dissolves historical associations between person and place. A fungible and anonymous mediator, money preserves the specific identities of neither the people who trade it nor the buildings for which it is traded. These transactions tack together a kind of incongruous architectural genealogy or disjointed lineage by marking the points at which a property moves between entirely new owners or uses—from Dame Elizabeth Salvage to the Crown and from nunnery to powder house, for instance—as opposed to being passed down within a family or retained by successive generations of a religious order.

In the Survey, it is not only former monastic properties that challenge or disrupt narratives that had traditionally relied on close connections among landowner, architecture, land, and tenants. Just after his account of the former Augustine Friars’ house, Stow provides the history of a building in nearby Throgmorton Street, a “very large and spacious” house. It had been built by the late Thomas Cromwell, who experienced a rapid rise in status, having been “Mais-ter of the kinges Jewell house, after that Maister of the Rols, then Lord Cromwell knight, Lord privie seale, Vicker Generall, Earle of Essex, high Chamberlaine of England, &c.” The story of his building projects reveals ruptures in the conventional political and social relationships relied on by Camden and the country house poems. “This house being fi nished, and having some reasonable plot of ground left for a Garden, hee caused the pales of the Gardens adjoyning to the northe parte thereof on a sodaine to bee taken downe, 22. foot to bee measured forth right into the north of every mans ground, a line there to bee drawne, a trench to be cast, a foundation laid, and a high bricke Wall to bee builded” (1.179). Despite its association with an illustrious figure, in Stow’s text, this house functions as a distorted echo of the country house narrative, which appears here in an inverted and thwarted form. Social and moral conceptions of nobility are separated from each other and, rather than casting the house as stabilizing and legitimizing aristocratic identity through the reification of ancestral history, he describes it in terms of its newness. Further, this new architecture erases and overwrites traces of the past as Cromwell removes the “pales of the Gardens adjoyning” and scores the property with the “trench” of a new foundation, enfor-
ing this new property line with a “high bricke Wall.” His goal is not to recuperate history in a serviceable way, as a country house poet or owner might, but to deny it completely.

Stow continues by returning to the concern with just and harmonious landlord-tenant relations that characterizes both the work of the land surveyor and some country house poems, including “To Penshurst.” It was a personal concern to him, for his own father was affected by Cromwell’s redefinition of the property lines, which apparently encroached upon the holdings of multiple tenants (“every mans ground”).

My Father had a Garden there, and an house standing close to his south pale, this house they lowsed from the ground, & bare upon Rowlers into my Fathers Garden 22. foot, ere my Father heard thereof, no warning was given him, nor other answere when hee spake to the surveyers of that worke, but that their Mayster sir Thomas commaunded them so to doe, no man durst go to argue the matter, but each man lost his land, and my Father payde his whole rent, which was vi.s. viii.d. the yeare, for that halfe which was left. (1.179)

In “To Penshurst,” Jonson would point out that the walls of Penshurst were “reared with no man’s ruin, no man’s groan” (46). These garden walls, by contrast, appear to have been raised accompanied by the groaning of many men, Stow’s father among them. While the walls of Sidney’s estate are presented as representations of the stable and harmonious social relationships that the poem goes on to celebrate, Cromwell’s house literally and unjustly destroys such relationships: “each man lost his land, and my Father payde his whole rent . . . for that halfe which was left.” As opposed to the cheerful and forthcoming peasants who would appear in “To Penshurst,” these tenants are frustrated by the oppressive power dynamics that structure landlord-tenant relationships: “no man durst go to argue the matter.” In this case, the history being collected remains contested, instead of being channeled toward the celebration of a family or individual. Thomas Cromwell’s status and authority supply Stow’s themes, but his presence creates resentment and disorder. Both are reflected in the narrative itself, which, in Stow’s view, lacks a satisfactory resolution. Even though “no man durst go to argue the matter,” in the pages of Stow’s record the matter continues to be argued. Further, this scene represents Cromwell’s falling away from the ideals that Jonson later would celebrate in Sidney’s welcoming house; Cromwell is previously cited in the Survey as an example of public charity.29 Stow recalls having seen at Cromwell’s gate “more then two hundered persons served twise every day with bread, meate, and drinke sufficient, for hee observed that auncient and
charitable custome as all prelates, noble men, or men of honour and worship . . . had done before him” (1.89).

The moral with which Stow finishes Cromwell’s story fittingly charges the statesman with ignoring historical authority and violating its continuity. Perhaps because of the immediacy of its characters (Stow’s own father), this story is capped with an unusually explicit judgment: “Thus much of mine owne knowledge have I thought good to note, that the suddaine rising of some men, causeth them to forget themselves” (1.179). Like his less explicit judgment of the marquis, the observation reflects Stow’s antiquarian interests; Cromwell’s crime is not one of greed, but one of forgetting. In a way that parallels the marquis’s sale of ancient funeral monuments, Cromwell’s approach to architecture manifests his own disregard for the very stories that, from an antiquarian perspective, made architecture valuable. To the antiquarian or surveyor, architecture in part became legible through the lens of historical documents, the “rentes / fees, customes, & services, the lorde oughte to have of his tenaunts” described by Fitzherbert (see Chapter 2) or the “old Rowle[s], and Evidence[s]” Camden claims to have consulted.30 Cromwell, however, uses architecture to render precisely such documents impotent and meaningless, as their set rents and measurements no longer correspond to set measures of land. In this case, an antiquarian’s historical evidence undercuts the legitimacy of a landlord’s connection to the land, so that instead of providing a felicitous confluence of virtue and social prominence or a stable culmination to Stow’s narrative, the landlord initiates ruptures in this network of relationships.

Moreover, Cromwell’s acquisition of his land did not result from lineal inheritance but from the events of his “suddaine rising.” As the house of Stow’s father is lifted on rollers and deposited elsewhere in his garden, architecture maps the displacements and discontinuities of history in a surprisingly literal way. The final lines of the building’s story indicate an equally abrupt disjuncture; the building passes not from Cromwell to an heir but to the Company of Drapers, for use as their “common Hall,” readers learn in the subsequent paragraph (1.180). Stow leaves one part of Cromwell’s own history unspoken, although he might well have expected readers to remember it: in 1540, Cromwell, having fallen out of favor, was executed by, as the historian Edward Hall put it, “a ragged and Boocherly miser, whiche very ungoodly perfourmed the Office.”31 While Stow’s version of the story does not include Cromwell’s literal decapitation, his narrative is itself truncated and ruptured, its loose ends suddenly redirected towards a new and incongruous end. While a traditional country house narrative might have ended by celebrating a nobleman’s titles and authority, Cromwell is
stripped of both, displaced by the Drapers and a “common Hall.” Punished for the crime of forgetting himself, in Stow’s architectural history, Cromwell fails to achieve the final word.

Stow thus reminds us that by the early seventeenth century, London already resembled a map that had had its city pulled out from under it, in which both place names and architectural places presented historical riddles, rather than a stable association between person and place, or name and thing. Stow’s account of the former Blackfriars monastery—for Jonson, the Blackfriars theater—reminds us, as well, that the real architectural setting toward which Jonson so pointedly gestures was equally a product of conversion and change. In 1610, Jonson’s choice of topographical label (“Friars”) was conspicuously both accurate and inaccurate, evoking at once the theater itself and an order of monks who no longer lived there. Stow’s Survey records that from 1276 until 1538, the site had been occupied by the powerful Dominican order and had included “a large church, and richly furnished with Ornaments: wherein diverse parliaments and other great meetings hath beene holden.” Some of these convocations were medieval, but the monastery had also witnessed important religious and political fluctuations in the past century of London’s history. In 1529, “Cardinall Campeius the Legat, with Cardinal Woolsey sate at the said blacke friers, where before them as Legats & Judges, was brought in question the kings marriage with Queene Katherin as to be unlawfull, before whom the king and Queene were cited and summoned to appeare” (1.339). Before the year was out, however, the tide had turned: “The same yeare in the Moneth of October began a parliament in the Blacke Friers, in the which Cardinall Woolsey was condemned . . . this house valued at 104.li. 15.s. 5.d. was surrendred the xii. of November the 30. of Henrie the eight” (1.340). The land was sold to Sir Thomas Cawarden, Master of the King’s Revels, who soon pulled down some of the complex, including the Blackfriars church. In Jonson’s day, though, some of the original buildings remained, and it was one of these, the monastery’s large medieval hall, that James Burbage purchased for use as the Second Blackfriars theater in 1596.32

If Jonson’s reference to the “Friars” suggests similarities between the activities of the actors and those of the tricksters in The Alchemist, it also points to other correspondences between the play’s imagined setting and the theater in which early performances took place. For Jonson, architecture was inherently historical, and Lovewit’s house, like the theater building itself, documents stories of instability and change, of the dissociation between person and location. A reading of Stow thus illuminates the historical dimensions of Jonson’s setting and, by extension, helps to explain some of the ways social identity is constructed in the
play. Both the *Survey* and *The Alchemist* place us among the ruins of a particular kind of architectural narrative. In *The Alchemist*, the breakdown of conventional connections among architecture, topography, and authority allows new formulations of social prominence and identity to emerge.

Transported to an urban environment, the narrative threads that structure the accounts of country houses in antiquarian chorographies and land surveys, and that would soon structure Jonson’s own “To Penshurst,” are evident mainly in their acknowledged absence. In the play’s first scene, questions of ownership, habitation, history, lineage, and ordered, hierarchical social relations are all raised only to be dismantled or dismissed. Most obviously, Lovewit, the current genteel owner, who would provide the culmination of a conventional country house description, is absent as long as “there dies one a week / O’ the plague,” and it is this very absence that sponsors the action of the play (1.1.182–183). Far from exemplifying husbandry and household economy, and in contrast to the lord who “dwells” in “To Penshurst,” Lovewit is totally unaware of the ways in which his servant is behaving and his house is being used. Face assures Subtle and Doll, “O, fear not him . . . he’s safe from thinking toward London . . . If he do, / He’ll send such word, for airing of the house, / As you shall have sufficient time, to quit it” (1.1.182, 183, 185–188). Moreover, we learn that Lovewit’s wife has recently died; instead of her presence keeping the house in order, her permanent disappearance has “broke [it] up” (1.1.58). Subtle’s reference to human mortality introduces another disruption to any traditional order, and the mistress’s death precludes the establishment of a stable lineage through the production of heirs, in contrast, for instance, to the “noble, fruitful” and “chaste” mistress of “To Penshurst” (90). More important, though, her absence opens a space for a new succession of mistresses—first Doll Common and then Dame Pliant—who each reflect and shape the new characteristics of the household. Thus, if the presence of Lovewit and his wife would have supplied the capstones of a country house story, the story of this house has become indeterminate and decidedly uncapped.

In a vitriolic quarrel, Face imagines himself as a kind of replacement for his absent master, and the play’s first scene consists largely of Subtle’s attempts to undercut that image. Face presents himself to Subtle as a version of the genteel householder, in a position either to dole out charity or to rent out space, playing at once the householder and the charitable benefactor:

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. (1.1.43–47)

Constructing a scenario in which Subtle has violated both social order and harmonious landlord-tenant relations, Face accuses Subtle of failing to show either deference or gratitude, or to acknowledge his obligation to Face. To take Subtle in, according to Face, was less a promising investment than it was an act of charitable pity, as he reminds Subtle of their first meeting:

   at Pie Corner,
   Taking your meal of steam in, from cooks’ stalls,
   Where, like the father of hunger, you did walk
   Piteously costive. (1.1.25–28)

Perversely enabled by Face’s generosity, Subtle’s arrogance, according to Face, is completely unfounded; it is his access to “The place” which Face has afforded him that has “made [Subtle] valiant” (1.1.63). Despite Face’s attempts to escape the social hierarchy in which he was a servant, he re-imagines himself in a way that mimics its principles. In Face’s view, priority remains closely connected to the control of “place.”

Subtle’s response is to claim that rather than acting as a stable and legitimate head to the household, Face is only a parody of that figure, failing to fill the role on all counts, including moral character, social status, and historical authority. Face’s representation of himself as a charitable landlord is delusional, Subtle points out, both because he is not charitable and because he is not a landlord. When Face asserts that he has “lent” Subtle “a house to practise in,” Subtle reminds him that it is not his house at all. “Your master’s house?” he retorts, and produces the same answer to Face’s accusation that Subtle has misused his new accommodation by “stud[y]ing the more thriving skill / Of bawdry, since”: “Yes, in your master’s house. / You, and the rats, here kept possession” (1.1.47, 49–50). Subtle thus reasserts Lovewit’s prerogative as a way of preventing Face’s assumption of the master’s role. He also counters Face’s pretensions to magnanimity and charity by claiming that he has failed to maintain even the barest hospitality toward the poor; he has instead kept “the butt’ry-hatch still lock’d, and save[d] the chippings” as well as selling “the dole beer to aqua-vitae men” (1.1.52–53). Moreover, unlike a true genteel landowner, Face’s “possession” of the house is not supported by historical tradition:
You were once (time’s not long past) the good,
Honest, plain, livery-three-pound-thrum; that kept
Your master’s worship’s house, here, in the Friars,
For the vacations. (1.1.15–17)

Resorting to a conventional way of telling time in antiquarian texts, Subtle argues that, “Within man’s memory,” Face has been promoted from this servitude by his means (1.1.20). While the names and arms of noble families might organize history in a country house narrative, Face possesses no similar social credentials: “Slave,” Subtle goes on to accuse him, “thou hadst no name” (1.1.81).

While Subtle is proving that Face is a poor shadow of the legitimate genteel householder, Doll Common emerges as an equally perverted replacement for the household’s deceased mistress. Doll imposes uneasy order on her colleagues by ending the quarrel, persuading them to “work close, and friendly”; but it is an order characterized specifically by its lack of regard for history, traditional virtue, or hierarchical social relations (1.1.161). In these respects, the household mirrors the character of Doll herself. No lofty example of virtue, chastity, or lineage, Doll, as a professed prostitute, confronts the audience with an obvious inversion of these qualities. As she recalls with a pun on her name—“Have yet some care of me, o’ your republic”—Doll is herself a res publica or common thing, the undifferentiated property of many men and not, through chastity, the progenitor of a stable family line (1.1.110). In fact, instead of representing the triumphant culmination of an ancestral history, Doll constantly works in this scene to erase the past, pleading with Subtle and Face to forget the former distinctions and liabilities they insistently dredge up. The “venture tripartite,” according to Doll, is a “work . . . begun out of equality” with “All things in common” (1.1.133–136). She thus argues for a system of social relationships that is not historically established but is newly begun and that would allow the tricksters to collaborate “Without priority” (1.1.136). Grudgingly prodded back into a state of peace, Face and Subtle celebrate Doll as the house’s new and comically distorted mistress:

at supper, thou shalt sit in triumph,
And not be styl’d Doll Common, but Doll Proper,
Doll Singular: the longest cut, at night,
Shall draw thee for his Doll Particular. (1.1.176–179)

In Face’s description, Doll resembles the equitable household she imagines: she is distinguished by her lack of distinction. The final line of Face’s tribute, which names Doll “Particular” is also the scene’s most explicit reference to her un-
discerning promiscuity and her failure to assume a stable social identity as one man’s wife. She thus becomes “Singular” and “Particular” only by virtue of the behavior that makes her “Common.”

Like the country house narrative, then, *The Alchemist* is in part about the formation and legitimization of social identities. Here, however, as the conventional ingredients of social status are pointedly shown to be lacking, new possibilities are introduced. During this expository squabble, it becomes apparent that there is more at stake for the tricksters than either vanity or the finite sums of money they will fleece from their willing gulls. They seem to have begun by seeking a more permanent social transformation that is not contingent on Lovewit’s absence. While critical interpretations of *The Alchemist* have tended to focus on the tricksters’ theatrical talents and ingenious deceptions, the first and final acts of the play, in particular, suggest that their enterprises are anchored in a sincere hope of achieving the philosopher’s stone. The sincerity of their belief raises the stakes of the tricksters’ activities and changes our sense of what will be lost if Lovewit returns too soon. New possibilities emerge as serious competition for the traditional order that originally structured Lovewit’s household, and the alchemical process itself presents an alternative to the social hierarchies and ancestral histories we see celebrated in narratives about the country house. Calling Subtle and Face “Sovereign” and “General” respectively in the fifth line of the play, Doll demonstrates that the “venture tripartite” is not only a business venture aimed at financial returns; it is also an investment in the transcendence of previous social limitations, in the making of new credentials and new titles.

In addition to deflating Face’s representation of himself as a genteel replacement for Lovewit, Subtle in another way undermines the hierarchy that formerly ordered the household, by advancing an alternative form of authority. In Subtle’s view, status depends not on ancestry, ownership, or a sense of noblesse oblige (all of which, he says, Face lacks), but on acquisition of the alchemical arts, which produce the possibility of more sudden transformations, both material and social. It might be accurate to say that Face was originally Subtle’s gull. Claiming to have given Subtle “credit for [his] coals,” Face suggests that he has advanced to his unsuccessful colleague both money and belief, and when he speaks of purchasing “Your stills, your glasses, your materials” and having “Built you a furnace,” he seems to be speaking literally; his original investment was in Subtle the alchemist, not Subtle the trickster. Despite his easy transition from alchemist to bawd, though, Subtle appears to believe in his own abilities, and his excuse for not having fulfilled his promises echoes one that actually appeared in contemporary alchemical treatises: he hasn’t yet had time. In a new edition of George
Ripley’s *Compound of Alchymy* (1591), Ralph Rabards bitterly complains, “if I had bin so fortunate as to have spent these seaven yeares past in one of your majesties manifold fruitlesse still-houses: I durst before this time have presumed to have promised more of my selfe than I will speak of.” Instead, Subtle says, he has been forced to waste time effecting another projection: that of Face himself, by imparting to Face the secrets of his own “great art.” “[H]ave I,” Subtle asks,

Sublim’d thee, and exalted thee, and fix’d thee
I’ the third region, call’d our state of grace?
Wrought thee to spirit, to quintessence, with pains
Would twice have won me the philosopher’s work?
Put thee in words and fashion? Made thee fit
For more than ordinary fellowships?
Giv’n thee thy oaths, thy quarrelling dimensions?
Thy rules, to cheat at horse-race, cock-pit, cards,
Dice, or whatever gallant tincture else?
Made thee a second in mine own great art? (1.1.68–77)

Given the list of dissolute misdemeanors that immediately precedes it—quarreling, gambling, and cheating—the phrase “great art” might seem to refer mainly to Subtle’s “bawdry,” but it can equally refer to alchemy itself, and in the coming acts it becomes apparent that Face has indeed been extensively schooled in the obtuse and coded language of alchemical treatises. Subtle also seems serious in his threats to Face:

I’ll thunder you in pieces. I will teach you
How to beware to tempt a Fury again,
That carries tempest in his hand and voice. (1.1.60–62)

While the lines are a credible extension of Subtle’s volatile personality, he thinks he is master of something more. In keeping with the aims of the “venture tripartite,” Subtle’s assertion that he has put Face “in words and fashion” and made him “fit / For more than ordinary fellowships” casts both of his areas of expertise—deception and distillation—as alternative forms of social advancement and legitimization, in place of the attributes—name, property, and historically established authority—he has proven Face not to possess.

As the play continues, the alchemical process itself emerges as an analogy, or even substitute, for the components of genteel or aristocratic identity. Through the comically cryptic language that veils alchemical mysteries, the laboratory becomes a site for the manipulation of time and generation. Performing for Sir
Epicure Mammon and Surly, Face describes the stages of alchemy as a genealogy or ancestry:

It turns to sulphur, or to quicksilver,
Who are the parents of all other metals.
Nor can this remote matter, suddenly,
Progress so from extreme unto extreme,
As grow to 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 engender’d;
Sulphur o’ the fat and earthy part: the one
(Which is the last) supplying the place of male,
The other of the female, in all metals. (2.3.153–163)

These metallic “parents,” according to Subtle, “can produce the species of each metal / More perfect thence, than nature doth in earth” (2.3.169–170). The alchemical breeding process thus replicates the more commonly observable phenomenon of spontaneous generation: “Art can beget bees, hornets, beetles, wasps, / Out of the carcasses, and dung of creatures” (2.3.172–173). This effusion is, of course, intended to confirm Mammon’s optimism; and, significantly, Subtle turns to the language of parentage and pedigree when he seeks to assert the legitimacy of his art.

Subtle thus presents himself as the manipulator of a history that resembles many aristocratic pedigrees: it is part nature and part art, part conscious invention and part earnest belief. The alchemist’s goal, as Subtle represents it, is to improve on what happens naturally, or at least to speed it up, proceeding more rapidly from the “imperfect” to the “perfect.” Alchemy allows metals to pass through the generations of this pedigree in record time and to arrive more quickly at its stable endpoint, the gold that, Subtle says, all metals would “be . . . if they had time” (2.3.136). Anticipating the arrival of Sir Epicure Mammon, Subtle says, “He [Mammon] will make / Nature asham’d of her long sleep: when art, / Who’s but a step-dame, shall do more than she” (1.4.106–107). The alchemist thus intervenes as a “step-dame” in a natural process, here figured in the terms of biological lineage. As Subtle continues, he imagines alchemy as creating an accelerated series of generations, which, repeated again and again, is as productive as nature: “For look, how oft I iterate the work, / So many times, I add unto his [the stone’s] virtue,” ultimately producing a result “As good as any of the natural mine” (2.3.106–107, 114). While the ancestral narratives of the Britannia and
the country house poems practice a kind of narrative distillation by filtering and shaping history so that all stories point toward the stable and legitimate tenure of the current landowner, the alchemist practices his own distillation, holding forth the possibility of an alternative endpoint in the form of the philosopher’s stone and the gold it will produce.

The play’s opening scene lays out two temporal trajectories—Lovewit’s return and the success of alchemy—and the former comes to fruition at the expense of the latter. Still, the play’s final scene confronts both gulls and audience with the material evidence of the tricksters’ endeavors; it appears that some sort of chemical experiment has actually been taking place. Lovewit describes the interior of his house to the disgruntled gulls:

Here, I find
The empty walls, worse than I left ’em, smok’d,
A few crack’d pots, and glasses, and a furnace,
The ceiling fill’d with poesies of the candle. (5.5.41–44)

Traces of the alchemical process are here viewed from a different temporal perspective, evoking memories, rather than sparking hopes. There is something wistful about these abandoned material fragments and the “poesies” written by a light now extinguished. As Anne Barton writes, “this final description of the house always comes as a shock. . . . It becomes plain that Mammon, Tribulation and the rest are not the only ones who have been fooled by art.” The remnants of Subtle’s apparatus point again toward alchemy’s competing history, toward the generative process that would produce an alternative ending to the landowner’s authority.

Throughout, The Alchemist is threaded with elements of the country house narrative—ancestry, land ownership, inheritance, and hospitality—but they are disrupted and comically modified. Lovewit’s house (transformed to the alchemical laboratory) is repeatedly presented as a place where characters seek to transcend the limitations of their own identities by reformulating traditional sources of social status. Unable to produce the felicitous familiar they have promised Dapper, for instance—which, Face tells Kastril, “will win . . . / By irresistible luck, within this fortnight, / Enough to buy a barony”—the tricksters temporarily gratify their victim by inventing for him a more illustrious ancestry (3.4.58–60). Rather than being “a special gentle, / That is the heir to forty marks a year,”—“which I count nothing,” Face will later say—and “the sole hope of his old grandmother,” Dapper becomes the nephew of the Queen of Fairy (1.2.50–51, 3.4.57, 1.2.53). Doll pretends that this invented relative “may chance / To leave him three or four hundred chests of treasure, / And some twelve thousand acres
of Fairyland” (5.4.53–55). Although this region remains impenetrable to the general public, Dapper’s benevolent supernatural aunt resembles nothing so much as a wealthy, childless dowager looking for somewhere to bestow her wealth, over which, as a “lone woman” she has total control (1.2.155). Like a country house, Lovewit’s house becomes a site for the staging of hospitality, here represented as not generous and bountiful but capricious and disgusting. Dapper (in preparation for a long wait in the “privy lodgings”) is sent “a dead mouse, / And a piece of gingerbread, to be merry withal,” reportedly taken from her Grace’s “own private trencher” (3.5.79, 65–66). The offering anticipates, in comically diminished form, the “liberal board” and “lone’s own meat” which Jonson would praise in “To Penshurst” (59, 62), as Dapper eagerly believes he will ascend from his station as a clerk to that of a genteel landowner, the heir to a formerly unknown country estate (“some twelve thousand acres”). Dapper believes that the limitations of ancestry and social station may be erased by Subtle’s art and replaced with the promise of a new, more lucrative and expedited inheritance, whose fulfillment feels more imminent, even as it is perpetually deferred.

In contrast to Dapper, who imagines alchemy as a way of making substitutions within the conventional components of social status and legitimacy—inheritance, landownership, and ancestry—Sir Epicure Mammon believes it will allow him to transcend these requirements altogether. Enjoying a social status higher than any other character in the play, Mammon might reasonably rely most heavily on the possession of these attributes. Instead, he sees them not as advantages but as constraints to his desire. Rather than invoking idealized connections between landowner and land, identity and ancestral history, or social status and moral character, Mammon looks to alchemy as a way of severing these ties and escaping the limitations they define. Like the Marquis of Winchester as he appears in Stow’s Survey, the acquisitive Mammon displays no regard for the historical and topographical associations from which he might be expected to benefit. It is not only that Mammon hopes to dismantle buildings so that he can transmute base metals purchased from various sites around London. (“Buy / The coverings off o’ churches... . Let ’em stand bare, as do their auditory. / Or cap ’em new, with shingles,” Face says when Mammon wonders where he “will get stuff enough... to project on” [2.2.13, 15–16, 12]). Mammon also believes he will need to transmute the insufficient features of the landscape itself in order to make it commensurate with his desires. His first lines in the play imaginatively transform Lovewit’s house into an idealized new world. “Come on, sir. Now, you set your foot on shore / In novo orbe,” he gushes to Surly, “here’s the rich Peru” (2.1.1–2). Clearly figurative in this case, this transformative projection becomes
more literal as he imagines mining the resources of the English countryside, with
the purpose of transmuting it entirely: “I’ll purchase Devonshire, and Cornwall, /
And make them perfect Indies!” (2.1.35–36). Instead of establishing familial and
historical ties to a local geographic place in England, as a county chorography
would do, Mammon appropriates the imagery of a vaster empire. The nation,
apparently, is not enough world for him, and all nearly available places are in-
adequate indicators of his new identity.

In his courtship of the disguised Doll Common, Mammon rejects the notion
that topographical names and regions are sufficient to contain or describe the
status he plans to achieve. The narratives of the country house poems and of cho-
rographies such as the Britannia are firmly pinned to the landscape; their logic
depends upon securing a mutually definitive relationship between person and
place. But for Mammon, this specificity is only confining. Having already told
Doll that he would “spend half [his] land” (4.1.104) to rescue her from her current
social invisibility, Mammon goes on to imagine a new, exalted status through
increasingly transcendent and unnamable ideas of the places they will inhabit:

I am pleas’d the glory of her sex should know,
This nook, here, of the Friars, is no climate
For her, to live obscurely in, to learn
Physic, and surgery, for the Constable’s wife
Of some odd hundred in Essex; but come forth,
And taste the air of palaces

. . . . . . . . . . .

when the jewels
Of twenty states adorn thee, and the light
 Strikes out the stars; that, when thy name is mention’d,
 Queens may look pale. (4.1.130–135; 141–144)

Mammon’s assumption is that Doll’s status is defined—and here circumscribed
—by the places she knows or inhabits. Her coming forth, then, is reflected in
Mammon’s progress from confined to unconfined conceptions of place, from
“the Friars” or “some odd hundred in Essex” to dislocated “palaces” and wealth
that is boundless, being made up of “the jewels / Of twenty states.” Mammon
imagines Doll’s preeminence as being greater than any conferred by the sover-
eignty of a nation; it is not only a “nook” or neighborhoods or counties but coun-
tries that become insufficient markers of identity. Far from feeling that he or Doll
will be elevated through association with some named and demarcated area of
land, Mammon feels that they would actually be diminished by it.
Mammon’s treatment of history and ancestry resembles his treatment of place. Rather than seeking to inscribe his relationship to a particular family or past, Mammon seeks to supplant the necessity of either. At first, his interest in Doll seems to emerge from a fixation on the qualities most celebrated in the country house poem: titles, lineage, and inherited wealth. Face claims that he has, at Mammon’s request, prepared Doll for her new suitor by advancing his status as a “noble fellow” and “told her such brave things o’ you, / Touching your bounty and your noble spirit” (2.3.318, 4.1.6–7). According to Face, similar themes should supply Mammon’s conversation as he first accosts her: “And you must praise her house, remember that, / And her nobility” (4.1.19–20). “Let me, alone,” Mammon replies. “No herald, no nor antiquary, Lungs,/ Shall do it better. Go” (4.1.20–21). Face’s recommendations are no doubt intended to make Mammon additionally ridiculous as he heaps traditional moral and social values on a woman whom we know to possess none of them. But in the end, Mammon invokes these qualities only to reject them emphatically. Once he has acquired the stone, Mammon believes, neither his past nor Doll’s will make any difference, since he will have the power to invent them both anew. Calling Doll the “Daughter of honour,” he tells her: “I will rear this beauty / Above all styles” (4.1.116, 117–118). Rather than encapsulating or expressing status, “styles,” or titles, like set measures of land, signal only limitation.

Throughout, Mammon’s fantasies diminish the significance of lineage and generation celebrated in the country house narrative, where both marriage and parentage are constitutive of identity. At first, he asserts gold’s potential to supersede familial relationships, as he envisions purchasing sex with the “sublim’d pure wife” of a “wealthy citizen, or rich lawyer” (“unto that fellow / I’ll send a thousand pound, to be my cuckold”), or employing “fathers and mothers” as his “bawds” (2.2.54–56, 57–58). Later, in his courtship of Doll, Mammon produces an odd adaptation of the Danaë myth, in which gold becomes less a vehicle for divine insemination than a strange sexual proxy for Mammon himself:

Think therefore, thy first wish, now; let me hear it:
And it shall rain into thy lap, no shower,
But floods of gold, whole cataracts, a deluge,
To get a nation on thee! (4.1.125–28)

Here, wealth and status are no longer compounded in the propagation of a noble line through the union of two aristocratic families, a method that Mammon seems at first to pursue when he hears of Doll’s fortune. Instead, Mammon invents a new concept of nationhood in which a population is begotten in an orgiastic fornication with gold itself. Social identity is no longer tied to biologi-
cal parentage, history, titles, or places, as these concepts are all superseded by the seminal agency of the philosopher’s stone and the gold it will produce. We might think here of Jonson’s reassuring address to Penshurst: “His children thy great lord may call his own, / A fortune in this age but rarely known” (91–92). Mammon’s children, the “nation” with which he identifies, are decidedly not his own, as gold erases the significance of biological ancestry and replaces it with an alternative pedigree. Mammon’s actual reproductive utility, his most basic involvement in the formation of familial relationships, is made obsolete by a shower of gold. Mammon seems to envision this scenario as a way of overcoming the practical limitations of human reproduction, which make even the most fruitful marriage unlikely to produce a nation; but ironically, unlike Sir Robert Sidney’s influence and identity, Mammon’s are effaced rather than iterated or reinscribed, through the sexual consummation of his union with Doll.

Mammon’s disdain for historical markers of identity is fittingly accompanied by a generally garbled sense of antiquity, and when he attempts to invoke history as a way of legitimizing alchemy, he is patently unconvincing to anyone but himself. “Will you believe in antiquity? Records?” he demands of Surly, then goes on to mix periods, places, and locations in a ridiculous way:

I’ll shew you a book where Moses and his sister,
And Solomon have written, of the art;
Ay, and a treatise penned by Adam—

O’ the philosopher’s stone, and in High Dutch
Which proves it was the primitive tongue. (2.1.80–83, 84, 86)

Whatever he believes about alchemy’s “antiquity,” Mammon’s insertion of “High Dutch” into biblical history certainly proves that he is no antiquarian, as his citation of documentary evidence is incompetent. His sloppy and opportunistic invocation of these specious historical “Records” points not only to Mammon’s gullibility but to his characteristic orientation toward history. Mammon thinks seriously only about future “projections,” and despite his eagerness to legitimate alchemy, “antiquity” is not what he cares about at all. It is perhaps in response to Mammon’s perspective that the tricksters invent Doll’s particular brand of madness:

She falls into her fit, and will discourse
So learnedly of genealogies,
As you would run mad, too, to hear her, sir. (2.3.240–242)
Doll’s purported antiquarianism is, in this house, a form of insanity, not learning, and once Mammon accidentally sets her off, her “discourse” becomes one more tirade in a general cacophony, reduced from narrative to indistinct noise.

In Mammon’s view, this capacity to erase or supersede history will also make alchemy the means by which social and moral nobility might be alienated from one another, upsetting the supposed harmony between status and character that legitimizes authority in country house narratives. Surly interrupts Mammon’s fantasy of taffeta shirts and perfumed, bird-skin gloves with the objection that even if Mammon is stupid enough to take alchemy on its own terms, he ought to acknowledge that character does matter, because the success of the alchemical enterprise is determined by the nature of the stone’s owner:

\begin{quote}
Why, I have heard, he must be \textit{homo frugi}, \\
A pious, holy and religious man, \\
One free from mortal sin, a very virgin. (2.2.97–99)
\end{quote}

Mammon protests, however, that his own character is irrelevant, because the philosopher’s stone is transferrable from person to person through the mediation of cash: “That makes it, sir, he is so,” Mammon replies; “But I buy it. / My venture brings it me” (2.2.100–101). In Mammon’s view, “venture” is as good as virtue, and as a result, his fantasies are also devoid of virtue, economy, or piety. Once again, attributes that might be used to naturalize and legitimize genteel or aristocratic status appear to Mammon only constraints.

As Subtle and Mammon address each other, they construct between them the fiction of an inheritance, forged by the exchange of money rather than by a shared bloodline. Subtle repeatedly addresses Mammon as “son” and pretends that he expects him to perpetuate his own virtuous character as he inherits the stone. “Son,” he says, “I doubt / Y’ are covetous” (2.3.4–5), and later,

\begin{quote}
If you, my son, should now prevaricate, \\
And to your own particular lusts employ \\
So great and catholic a bliss, be sure, \\
A curse will follow. (2.3.19–22)
\end{quote}

The scene is strewn with similar warnings: “Yes, son, were I assur’d / Your piety were firm,” and “Son, be not hasty” (2.3.102, 55–56). Mammon responds in kind, purchasing Subtle as the ancestor from whom his own new inheritance will flow: “Well said, Father!” he tells Subtle after a particularly long dissertation on the stages of the alchemical process (2.3.176). In this perverse genealogy, Mammon constructs a lineage whose ligaments are monetary rather than biological, and he
divorces social from moral conceptions of nobility by suggesting that one need not accompany the other, and that either, in the end, might be effectively replaced by “venture” or wealth. In “To Penshurst,” Jonson would commend the Sidneys for passing on to their offspring “their virtuous parents’ noble parts,” which include “religion” and “innocence” as well as “The mysteries of manners, arms and arts” (97, 93, 94, 98). In Mammon’s formulation, “venture” replaces both nature and nurture, obviating the need for any such moral education or inheritance.

Fired by his overactive imagination, Mammon chafes eagerly against the limitations of traditional markers of genteel or aristocratic identity—landownership, ancestry, and noble character—and thinks with pleasure of the life he would lead were he able to leave them behind. By contrast, Kastril, a young “gentleman, newly warm in his land,” lacks such imagination; and it is through Face’s intervention that he is brought to feel dissatisfaction, which gnaws away at conventional constructions of identity by dissolving Kastril’s regard for connections between person and place, or a landowner, his name, and his land (2.6.57). However despicable Kastril’s aspirations—“To learn to quarrel,” Drugger reports, “and to live by his wits”—his sense of identity is originally grounded in these associations; when he arrives in London, he seems proud of his status, and he means, Drugger reveals, to “die i’ the country” (2.6.61, 62). Kastril confirms that once he has acquired the behavioral accouterments of his genteel status, he hopes to “go down / And practise i’ the country” (3.4.24–25). For Kastril, wealth is inseparable from lineage; were he not, he says “the best o’ the Kastrils, I’d be sorry else, / By fifteen hundred, a year” (3.4.14–15). As he begins to teach Kastril to quarrel, Subtle addresses him in a way that both mocks and flatters his genteel inheritance:

> Come near, my worshipful boy, my *terrae fili,*
> That is, my boy of land; make thy approaches:
> Welcome, I know thy lusts, and thy desires,
> And I will serve, and satisfy ’em. (4.2.13–16)

As Mares notes, the phrase “*terrae fili*” is a euphemism for “bastard,” and Subtle’s translation, “boy of land,” is comic because it manages to be both literal and inaccurate, reversing the insult entirely to pinpoint what Kastril believes to be an impressive social advantage.

But the country house gentleman is ill-equipped to function in this city house play. Face quickly dismantles Kastril’s smug opinion of himself, and his land and income are transformed from points of pride to liabilities as Face persuades him that he could make more money gambling:
It will repair you, when you are spent.
How do they live by their wits, there, that have vented
Six times your fortunes? (3.4.51–53)

Kastril’s disbelief indicates that he has never before thought of such wealth, let alone dreamed of possessing it: “What, three thousand a year! . . . Are there such?” (3.4.53–54). Moreover, Face says, Subtle will introduce him to more lucrative sources of income “when your land is gone / (As men of spirit hate to keep earth long)” (3.4.83–84). Face’s parenthetical remark plays on the supposed elemental baseness of earth, but to Kastril, the lines seem to mean that town gallants are eager to obtain the “excellent fashion” Face describes, by selling off their land (3.4.81). Kastril is a quick study in dissolution and stupidity, and traditional components of genteel and aristocratic identity suddenly pale. The narratives that order accounts of the country house fail when transported to this city house, outstripped and undone by the promises of the alchemist’s art.

In several of its strands, then, this story of Lovewit’s London house places us among narratives that dismantle the conceptions of genteel and aristocratic identity constructed by the narratives in the *Britannia* and, later, country house poems. These narratives resemble the disordered and truncated architectural stories of Stow’s *Survey*, in which stable relationships among architecture, history, ancestry, and topography also fall into ruin. *The Alchemist*, however, may appear to depart from such accounts in its conclusion, which, on the surface, seems to place a stable capstone on this household’s story with the return of the actual householder. Face’s early predictions about Lovewit’s homecoming are prematurely fulfilled at the end of Act 4, displacing the operations of the alchemist’s lab by physically displacing the alchemist himself. Face’s identity suddenly reverts to the one Subtle insultingly recalled in the first scene: “I’ll into mine old shape again, and meet him, / Of Jeremy, the butler” (4.7.120–121). Along with the hopes of the other gulls, Mammon’s “novo orbe” and “rich Peru” vanish. As the house becomes Lovewit’s once again, Face’s pert question about whether the outraged Mammon intends to enter “Another man’s house” reminds us that this has been “Another man’s house” all along (5.3.11).

But this new household is not exactly a return to the old one, and it is fitting that Dame Pliant should become not only the house’s new mistress, but the means through which Lovewit’s house is, in some version, reestablished. “Give me but leave, to make the best of my fortune,” Face says to Lovewit,

And only pardon me th’ abuse of your house:
It’s all I beg. I’ll help you to a widow,
In recompense, that you shall gi’ me thanks for,  
Will make you seven years younger, and a rich one. (5.3.82–86)

Replacing Lovewit’s deceased wife and the sexually undiscriminating Doll Common, Dame Pliant also defines and reflects qualities of the household. If the death of Lovewit’s wife marked the end of a period when Face knew his place, and Doll represented the attempted foundation of a new “republic,” Lovewit’s marriage to Dame Pliant signals the inauguration of another new household, this one based on compromise and negotiation. As Lovewit prepares to don the Spanish cloak and boldly go where many men have attempted to go before by marrying this nineteen-year-old widow, he restores, in an oddly modified version, the traditional correspondence between a house and the history of its owner. Although Dame Pliant is not exactly the house’s owner, she is in many ways the truest reflection of its recent past: she too bears the name of an absent master, and she too has been reappropriated following a fruitless union irreparably disrupted by death. She is not quite a replacement for the house’s former mistress, as this new household is not quite a replacement for the one remembered at the beginning of the play. Both mistress and household bear traces or reminders of a recent and more unstable history.

As this dealing between Lovewit and Face (as Jeremy) indicates, Lovewit’s return is not so much the appearance of a *deus ex machina* as it is the initiation of a multistage renegotiation, in which Face becomes something slightly more than a servant and Lovewit acts as something less than the definitive master of the house. As Brian Gibbons points out, “Lovewit . . . can do no more than acknowledge the skill and wit of Face.” The first and last scenes of the play complement each other, not only through a process of prediction and fulfillment, but through their recollection and imperfect recuperation of traditional architectural narratives about the relationship between landowner and land, householder and house, and person and place. It is true that Face is forced to resign his role as “Captain,” to answer to “Jeremy” once again, and to dissolve the “venture tripartite” that had enabled him to hope he might shed that servile identity forever. When Lovewit first returns, however, he is no more able to reoccupy his own house than the indignant gulls are able to enter it. In this sense, he has less authority than the humble smith who offers to fetch a crowbar and pry open the door (5.1.45). Only once Face has dispatched with Dapper and reassessed his own bargaining chips does Lovewit reenter the house, because, as Face says, “here’s no place to talk on’t i’ the street” (5.3.81). In addition, Face has not entirely changed his ways; the promise he makes to Lovewit regarding Dame
Pliant echoes the extravagant and supernatural returns he promised his earlier investors: “I’ll help you to a widow . . . Will make you seven years younger, and a rich one.”

Face’s station in this household is partly new and partly old, partly remembered and partly achieved through Lovewit’s own pliancy and Face’s continued ingenious negotiations. Satisfied with the widow, Lovewit acknowledges his debt to his servant, promising, “I will be rul’d by thee in anything, Jeremy,” and confessing to the audience his satisfaction at having “receiv’d such happiness by a servant, / In such a widow, and with so much wealth” (5.5.143, 147–148). And in the final lines of the play, it is Face, rather than Lovewit, who speaks in the language of the hospitable, genteel householder, as he turns to the audience and, instead of making a plea for kindness, once again lays a deal on the table: “this pelf, / Which I have got, if you do quit me, rests, / To feast you often, and invite new guests” (5.5.163–165). Face’s “pelf” seems to consist of both his pardon and the new respect with which Lovewit regards him; if he hasn’t exactly gained the upper hand, he has gained some control over his master. Lovewit himself admits that to accept Face’s terms is “some small strain / Of his own candour” (5.5.151–152). In fact, Lovewit has bargained away more than his “candour”; he has also traded part of his identity as master of the house. Most obviously, the feasting and entertainment promised in these final lines refer to the possibilities of the theater itself, as a venue for new plays and new audiences. We might also perceive a similarity, however, to Penshurst’s “liberal board” and to the hospitable contract the poem describes between landlord and guest. Face’s new and unconventional station in the household—the “pelf” that he has “got”—is incongruously encased in the language of conventional hospitality that Jonson would revisit in his treatment of Sidney’s country house. Face has the final word; although Lovewit returns as predicted, his presence no longer completely defines the order of the household or provides the stable endpoint to the story of his house.

Perhaps surprisingly, it is this fragmented, unstable, and disorienting sense of place that locates Lovewit’s house most firmly in the cityscape of John Stow. In The Alchemist, as in Stow’s Survey, architectural setting reveals history’s contingencies and disruptions rather than a streamlined and idealized lineage in which status, landownership, and virtue neatly converge. In both works, these traditional narratives break down, appearing in partial and broken form as faint echoes of a genre based on stable associations among architecture, topography, and genteel or aristocratic identity. In the absence of the landlord, The Alchemist’s architectural setting lacks the order that characterizes antiquarian accounts
of the country house, and it therefore becomes susceptible to appropriation into other kinds of stories. Both the tricksters and the gulls, like Thomas Cromwell, could be charged with forgetting themselves as they imagine the swell of a “suddaine rising.” And, like the former monastery of the Augustine Friars—transmuted to stable, church, and storehouse—Lovewit’s house succumbs to negotiation and acquisitiveness, becoming a site where identity and history might be erased and re-created as much as commemorated or confirmed.

Differences between the architectural narratives of the Britannia and those of Stow’s Survey parallel the differences between the architectural settings of “To Penshurst” and The Alchemist. Like the chorographies of Camden and Stow, the two Jonson works are united by a historical view of architecture, but the application of this perspective leads to different ends in each case. As Archer has pointed out, the topography of early modern London presented special challenges to the writer of antiquarian history; and as I have shown, the fragmentation and dismantling of London’s material architecture resulted in the fragmentation and disruption of the stories associated with it. The synthetic historical threads of the Britannia and “To Penshurst” elucidate what is lacking in Lovewit’s unconventional household: not history, but a stable culmination to the stories of the past. Stow’s Survey roots this instability and indeterminacy in the features of post-Reformation London itself and reveals that, just as “To Penshurst” gestures toward a real building that existed outside its pages, Lovewit’s house is inseparable from the particular architectural features of the city to which it belongs.