

Character Sketch of Subtle

Dr. Subtle, or learned Dr. Subtle, a fraud and a cheat, is the central figure in the play. He is an impostor of the grossest kind. He is not only a pseudo-chemist who swindles his clients with his superior cunning and craftiness. He is also (a) a magician who has dealing with the spirit world and can provide his clients with a fly or familiar, an attendant spirit who can help them to win at games, of cards or dice. (b) An astrologer who can see in to the future, read lines and signs, foretell the lucky days, and thus has considerable appeal for the superstitious. (c) a brothel-keeper and pimp who exploits the sexual lust of those who come to him. (d) a man who is well-versed in the art of dwelling, and none can excel him in this respect, he claims; and (e) a priestly figure who dons the cloak of holiness to impress the simpletons while all the time he cheats and swindles, and indulges in most corrupt and immoral practices. He talks of heaven and good, of unchastity which is ruinous, in high-sounding religious terms, while all the time he is gross and vulgar, of the earth, earthy.

A Cheat and Swindler :-

As Herford and Simpson put it, he stands with one foot in the region of the prodigious, with the other planted firmly on the ground of current human nature. It is through him that the dramatist has exposed and stigmatised the cheats and swindlers who flourished abundantly in the age. Alchemy, a pseudo-science, was a widespread social malady of the times and the ways and techniques of such frauds as subtle, find their most powerful and realistic exposure in the present play. Subtle, crafty and foxy, like Jonson's Volpone, in the play of that name, is a clever actor like him. He can play different roles, change his role at a moment's notice, and is a different man with the different dupes, who come to him. But he lacks the poetry, culture and

refinement of Volpone

His Cunning Use of Philosophy :-

His present fortune depends on his playing his cards well, and he plays his part with the resources of one who was hungry yesterday and who knows that he may be hungry tomorrow. He has the cunning of the opulent magnifico (Volpone) without his vein of fiendish romance. Volpone's freaks of insolent brands here become the routine of a cheating trade. Volpone plays the mountebank in a fit of exuberant caprice. Subtle plays different roles in the sober way of business. He has indeed his philosophy too, and can expound it in lofty phrases and support it by arguments which silence the sceptic Surly and give pause even to our easy modern scorn for alchemy. Less out of generosity than out of the thorough going candour of the scholar, Jonsen allows him the benefit of the best answer which the wisdom of alchemistic speculation could provide.

A practitioner, whose methods with the public were subjected to so annihilating an exposure, might be allowed to score an intellectual victory over a layman with little risk. But Subtle's philosophy, his philosophy, his phrases and his arguments are not, in any intimate sense, his own; they are not, like Volpone's, tinged with the humours of an individual mind and temper. They are merely the common property of his bogus order; stock weapons which he handles according to the rules of a conventional sword-craft, - the trade practices of the alchemist quack. Even his sensuality is of a baser quality. Volpone makes base love to a noble woman; Mammon to a base woman whom he thinks noble; Subtle makes base love to Dol Common or Dame Pliant as occasion serves or the longest cut at night' decides, and if another man has been before him, it is only one man more.

Subtle, in short, is a cunning charlatan who tries to cover his gaudy cunning with the vesture of

philosophy and religion. He cheats all who come to him, and in case of failure has cunning enough to put the blame on them, as he does on Sir Epicure Mammon. The philosopher's stone can not be had by him, for he has been unchaste. But by the end of the play, the wheel comes full circle. His ally in rogues, Face, double-crosses him, and he has to make a comic and disgraceful exit, as Face shoots at him a volley of taunts and sarcastic remarks.

Both a Type and an Individual :-

Subtle is a typical figure, a representative and the most powerful presentation of the medieval pseudo- alchemists, but he has also individual qualities which distinguish him from the other alchemists who figure in literature. He is more versatile and more intelligent. His exposition of the philosophy of alchemy is not sheer nonsense, but shrewd, lucid, and convincing. Hence he can hold his own against such skeptics as Surely, and easily convince and persuade the believers.

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