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# The Representation of Greed in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*: A Comparative Study

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**Abstract**
This study explores the representation of greed in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, examining how the playwright uses satire, characterization, and dramatic irony to expose the destructive consequences of excessive desire for wealth and social advancement. Set against the backdrop of early seventeenth-century England, both plays present a society in which material ambition overrides moral values, leading individuals to deception, manipulation, and corruption. In *Volpone*, the protagonist's insatiable pursuit of wealth and pleasure ensnares both himself and those driven by the hope of inheritance. Similarly, *The Alchemist* portrays a range of characters whose greed makes them vulnerable to fraud and exploitation, revealing the pervasive nature of avarice across different social classes. Through a comparative textual analysis, this study argues that Jonson depicts greed not merely as an individual moral failing but as a social disease that undermines justice, integrity, and human relationships. By employing comic satire, Jonson exposes the absurdity of material obsession while simultaneously offering a critique of the ethical decline fostered by an increasingly commercial society. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* remain enduring commentaries on the corrupting power of greed and its profound impact on both individuals and society.

**Keywords:** *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, greed and Avarice, satire, morality

## Introduction

Greed has remained a significant subject of literary exploration because it reveals the tension between human desire and moral responsibility. In Renaissance and Jacobean drama, writers frequently examined the effects of excessive ambition, materialism, and self-interest within a rapidly changing social environment. Ben Jonson, one of the most influential dramatists of the early seventeenth century, used satire to expose the moral weaknesses of individuals and society. His comedies *Volpone* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610) provide critical representations of human avarice by presenting characters whose actions are driven by the desire for wealth, status, and personal advantage. Through these works, Jonson demonstrates how greed can corrupt human judgment and disrupt social and moral order.

In *Volpone*, Jonson presents greed as a destructive passion that controls both the deceiver and the deceived. The protagonist, Volpone, derives pleasure not only from possessing wealth but also from manipulating those who desire his fortune. His false illness and inheritance scheme attract characters such as Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, whose greed causes them to abandon morality, loyalty, and social dignity., Jonson's comedy reveals "the folly and corruption of human appetites" through characters who become slaves to their own desires. Similarly, *The Alchemist* explores greed through a society fascinated by sudden wealth and artificial transformation. The success of Subtle, Face, and Dol Common's fraudulent schemes depends upon the ambitions of their victims, whose longing for riches exposes their moral weakness (Barton 112).

Although *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* differ in setting and dramatic structure, both plays reflect Jonson's sustained criticism of a society shaped by material ambition and self-interest. Jonson's satirical method transforms greed into a central dramatic force, where characters become embodiments of excessive desire and moral

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failure. As it argues, Jonson's comedy often functions as a means of social correction by revealing human follies and encouraging audiences to recognize their own weaknesses). Through exaggeration, irony, and comic punishment, Jonson presents greed as a universal human flaw rather than merely a problem belonging to a particular historical period.

This paper examines the embodiment of greed in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* by analyzing the representation of avarice through characterization, satire, and dramatic technique. It argues that Jonson portrays greed as both a personal and social corruption that motivates deception, destroys relationships, and challenges moral values. By comparing the two plays, this study aims to demonstrate how Jonson's treatment of greed extends beyond comic entertainment and offers a deeper critique of human nature and the ethical consequences of uncontrolled desire.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative textual analysis to explore how greed is represented in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610). These two plays have been selected because both deal with characters who are driven by an excessive desire for wealth, social status, pleasure, and personal advantage. Through close reading, the study examines important passages, dialogues, actions, and dramatic situations that reveal the characters' greedy motivations. It particularly focuses on the ways greed shapes their behavior, choices, relationships, and moral judgments.

The analysis mainly focuses on three literary techniques: characterization, satire, and dramatic irony. Through characterization, the study looks at how characters such as Volpone, Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino in *Volpone*, as well as Subtle, Face, Dol Common, and their victims in *The Alchemist*, represent different forms of greed. Satire is examined to understand how Jonson makes fun of excessive material desire while also revealing its harmful effects on individuals and society. Dramatic irony is also important because the audience often understands the truth behind the characters' schemes while the greedy characters remain unaware of what is really happening or become blinded by their own desires.

The study also explores the close relationship between greed, deception, manipulation, and moral corruption. The two plays are then compared to identify both similarities and differences in Jonson's portrayal of avarice. Particular attention is given to the ways greed affects not only individual characters but also wider social relationships involving trust, marriage, justice, and social position. Scholarly books, journal articles, and other critical studies are used as secondary sources to support and provide context for the textual analysis.Overall, this comparative approach aims to show that Jonson presents greed as more than a personal weakness.According to Seuntjens et al., greed involves being self-interested and never feeling that one has enough (505). In both plays, it becomes a broader social and moral problem that encourages deception, destroys trust and human relationships, and gradually weakens the values that hold society together.

## Literature Review

Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610) have received extensive critical attention for their representations of avarice, deception, social ambition, and moral corruption. Although both plays are comedies, Jonson uses comedy not simply to entertain but also to expose social and moral weaknesses. Scholars have examined his treatment of greed from a variety of perspectives, including morality, characterization, satire, economic culture, consumerism, deception, and social mobility. Taken together, these studies suggest that greed in Jonson is more than an individual moral weakness; it is a powerful force that influences relationships, social behavior, and systems of value. A comparative examination of the ways greed is embodied in the characters of both plays, particularly through characterization, satire, and dramatic irony, therefore provides an opportunity to bring these different critical approaches together.

Traditional criticism of *Volpone* frequently emphasizes the play's moral treatment of avarice.

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Richard Dutton's editorial discussion of the play identifies its fable-like structure and emphasizes the way avarice and the pursuit of gold distort human character (Dutton 45). The animal names given to the major characters reinforce this interpretation. Volpone is associated with the fox, while Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino are associated with predatory birds. Through this animal imagery, Jonson makes greed an almost visible aspect of characterization. The characters seem to embody predatory appetites rather than rational human values. Their desire for Volpone's inheritance leads them to sacrifice dignity, loyalty, and moral responsibility. Greed, therefore, is not merely a theme in the play; it becomes a principle that shapes the characters' identities and determines their behavior.

This moral interpretation has been further developed by studies that examine avarice as a fundamental human passion. Rawashdeh, for example, identifies the desire to accumulate wealth as a central force in *Volpone* and connects Jonson's treatment of avarice to the broader literary tradition of representing excessive wealth-seeking as a destructive human vice (Rawashdeh 57–62). This interpretation is particularly useful for understanding the ethical dimension of Jonson's comedy because it shows that the legacy hunters are not simply comic figures. Their greed produces a systematic breakdown of moral values. Their actions reveal how the desire for wealth can overpower reason, loyalty, and a sense of social responsibility.

More recent scholarship, however, has complicated the conventional moral reading of *Volpone*. Oliver Hennessey challenges interpretations of the play as simply a "straightforward fable of avarice, miserliness, and material misappropriation" and instead examines Volpone's behavior through the concepts of pleasure, consumption, and commodity culture (Hennessey 83–105). Hennessey is particularly interested in Volpone's pleasure in "gulling"—the enjoyment he derives from deceiving people who are themselves driven by material desire. This interpretation is important for understanding the embodiment of greed because Volpone does not merely represent a desire to possess wealth. His character embodies a more complicated form of acquisitiveness in which wealth becomes a source of pleasure, power, manipulation, and domination. Greed, in this sense, operates on both psychological and economic levels.

The relationship between wealth and luxury provides another important dimension of *Volpone*. Alison V. Scott's discussion of the play's "use of riches" and the problem of luxury draws attention to the ways in which Volpone's wealth enables excessive consumption and sensual desire. This interpretation broadens the meaning of greed beyond the simple accumulation of money. Volpone's wealth allows him to treat both material objects and human beings as sources of pleasure. His pursuit of Celia consequently demonstrates how economic desire can become intertwined with sexual desire and possessiveness. Greed, in this context, becomes an appetite that extends beyond money and influences the way the character understands and treats other people.

Economic approaches to *Volpone* further place Jonson's representation of greed within the commercial culture of early modern England. Hennessey's analysis connects the play with Europe's expanding commercial environment and the commodity culture to which early modern theatre itself was connected. From this perspective, Volpone's behavior reflects broader tensions surrounding consumption, wealth, and pleasure. The satire therefore works on two levels: it condemns individual greed while also exploring the cultural conditions that make material acquisition an important source of identity and social power.

Studies of *The Alchemist* reveal a related but distinct representation of greed. Whereas *Volpone* is structured around inherited wealth and competition for a fortune, *The Alchemist* centers on the fantasy of acquiring wealth through artificial transformation. Anne Barton's discussion of the play emphasizes the metaphorical importance of alchemy and its capacity to provide Jonson with a dramatic framework for exploring human desire (Barton 136–153 ). The philosopher's stone, which supposedly transforms base metals into gold, becomes a powerful symbol of the characters' desire to transform their own

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social and economic circumstances. The alchemical fantasy thus mirrors the fantasies of the characters themselves: they want poverty to become wealth, obscurity to become status, and ordinary existence to become extraordinary prosperity.

So Im Kim's study is particularly significant for understanding greed in *The Alchemist*. Kim argues that Jonson satirizes not only the fraudulent figures—Subtle, Face, and Dol—but also their victims, including Dapper, Drugger, Mammon, and Tribulation, because both groups are motivated by greed. This interpretation is highly relevant to the present study because it demonstrates that greed is distributed throughout the dramatic world rather than embodied by a single villain. The deceivers exploit greed, but they are also greedy themselves. Similarly, the victims become vulnerable to fraud because their excessive desires prevent them from exercising rational judgment. Greed therefore creates a reciprocal relationship between the deceiver and the deceived.

The connection between greed and deception is further developed by criticism that argues that *The Alchemist* demonstrates the dangers of deceptive language and excessive greed while presenting theatre itself as a form of social education. This argument is significant because it links Jonson's characterization of greedy individuals to his dramatic technique. Subtle, Face, and Dol do not merely tell lies; they construct elaborate performances tailored to the desires of their victims. The success of their deception depends on their ability to identify and exploit the particular appetite of each "gull." Characterization and deception are therefore closely connected in the play, since the characters' desires determine both how they are deceived and how the deceivers manipulate them.

The theme of social advancement further complicates the representation of greed in *The Alchemist*. Jonson's characters seek wealth not only for material comfort but also for social mobility and personal transformation. Studies of the play's relationship with medieval romance have identified greed, social mobility, and new wealth as recurring concerns in Jonson's treatment of fantasy and desire. This perspective suggests that greed should not be understood simply as the desire for money. It also includes the desire for status, recognition, power, and escape from one's existing social position. The characters therefore embody different forms of acquisitive desire, each shaped by their particular social and personal ambitions.

Recent economic criticism extends this argument by connecting *The Alchemist* with broader questions about economic value and capitalist fantasy. Hwan's study approaches the play through New Economic Criticism and interprets alchemy as a metaphor through which Jonson examines the transformation of human desires into economic fantasies (Hwan 189–224). This approach is particularly useful because it shows how the desire for gold becomes a wider cultural obsession. The characters imagine that wealth can solve their personal, social, and psychological problems, but Jonson exposes the irrationality underlying this belief. Their desire for economic transformation ultimately makes them vulnerable to fraud.

A comparison of the existing scholarship on the two plays reveals an important similarity. In both *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, greed is embodied through characters whose identities and actions are shaped by excessive desire. In *Volpone*, Volpone embodies acquisitive pleasure and manipulation, while Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino embody the desire for inheritance. In *The Alchemist*, Subtle, Face, and Dol embody fraudulent acquisitiveness, while Dapper, Drugger, Mammon, and Tribulation embody different forms of material, social, or personal ambition. Kim's observation that both the deceivers and the deceived are motivated by greed is particularly important here because it suggests that avarice is a shared condition of the dramatic world rather than an isolated character trait.

The existing scholarship also demonstrates that Jonson uses satire and dramatic irony to expose greed. In *Volpone*, the audience knows that Volpone is pretending to be ill while the legacy hunters desperately compete for his inheritance. In *The Alchemist*, the audience recognizes the fraudulent nature of Subtle, Face, and Dol's

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schemes while their victims continue to believe their promises. This dramatic irony allows the audience to recognize the gap between the characters' self-perception and their actual behavior. Greedy characters often believe themselves to be intelligent and rational, yet their excessive desires make them predictable and easily manipulated. Jonson consequently uses comedy to reveal the irrationality that can exist beneath apparently rational economic ambition.

The satirical function of characterization is therefore central to the embodiment of greed. Jonson exaggerates particular appetites until they become defining characteristics. Volpone's pleasure in wealth and deception, Corvino's possessiveness, Corbaccio's obsession with inheritance, Mammon's extravagant fantasies, and Dapper's desire for gambling success all demonstrate how a single dominant appetite can govern human behavior. The characters become comic embodiments of particular forms of desire, allowing Jonson to transform individual weaknesses into recognizable social types. Through this technique, greed becomes both personal and representative: it belongs to individual characters while also reflecting broader patterns of social behavior.

Although substantial scholarship has examined avarice, luxury, deception, economic culture, and social ambition in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, there remains room for a more focused comparative study of how greed is embodied through characterization and dramatic technique in both plays. Existing scholarship often examines the moral dimensions of *Volpone*, the relationship between pleasure and commodity culture, or the connection between alchemy, deception, and economic fantasy in *The Alchemist*. These approaches are valuable, but comparatively less attention has been given to how Jonson constructs greed as a shared dramatic identity across the two plays and how different characters embody different manifestations of the same acquisitive impulse.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the embodiment of greed in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* through characterization, satire, and dramatic irony. It argues that Jonson represents greed not merely as an individual moral failing but as a pervasive social force that shapes human identity, relationships, and ethical judgment. In *Volpone*, greed is embodied through the pursuit of inheritance, luxury, pleasure, and power; in *The Alchemist*, it appears through the desire for sudden wealth, social advancement, gambling success, and personal transformation. In both plays, excessive desire creates opportunities for deception and exploitation while simultaneously exposing the vulnerability of those who pursue wealth. The comparative study therefore seeks to demonstrate that Jonson's satire presents greed as both a personal vice and a social force, making the two plays enduring critiques of material obsession and moral corruption.

**Research Objective**

The primary objective of this study is to comparatively examine the embodiment of greed in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610) through characterization, satire, and dramatic irony. The study aims to analyze how characters such as Volpone, Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, Subtle, Face, Dol Common, and their victims represent different forms of excessive desire for wealth, luxury, social status, pleasure, and personal advancement. It further seeks to investigate how greed influences deception, manipulation, moral judgment, and human relationships, while examining Jonson's use of satire and dramatic irony to expose the absurdity and destructive consequences of acquisitive desire. By comparing the two plays, the study ultimately aims to demonstrate that Jonson presents greed not merely as an individual moral weakness but as a pervasive social and ethical corruption that encourages exploitation, undermines trust and social order, and ultimately leads to self-destruction and punishment.

**Comparative Textual Analysis:**

Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610) are comedies in which greed plays a major role in shaping the characters, their actions, and their relationships with others. Although the two plays have different plots and settings, both explore how an excessive desire for wealth, luxury, pleasure, and social status can affect

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people's judgment and behavior. In *Volpone*, greed is mainly connected with money, inheritance, luxury, and the desire to possess wealth. In *The Alchemist*, however, greed is more closely linked to the dream of becoming rich quickly, gaining social status, taking risks, and changing one's social position. Jonson uses characterization, satire, dramatic irony, and deception to reveal the different ways greed influences human behavior. His characters often become so focused on personal gain that they ignore trust, morality, and genuine human relationships. As a result, greed affects not only individuals but also the people around them, creating an environment where relationships and human values are often judged in terms of money and personal advantage. By comparing the two plays, this study explores how Jonson presents greed as both a personal weakness and a wider social problem. However, scholars have noted that greed may have both positive and negative consequences, depending on the circumstances and the behaviors through which it is expressed (Zeelenberg and Breugelmans).The analysis is based on close readings of the primary texts, supported by relevant scholarly and critical studies.

## 1. **Gold as the Object of Greed in *Volpone***

Jonson introduces the theme of greed from the very beginning of *Volpone*. In the opening scene, Volpone speaks about his wealth in almost religious terms:

"Good morning to the day; and next, my gold! Open the shrine, that I may see my Saint." (Jonson, Volpone 1.1)

This passage is important because Volpone does more than simply admire his wealth—he treats it as something worthy of worship. By referring to his gold as his "Saint" and his treasure room as a "shrine," Jonson shows how deeply money has taken the place of religion in Volpone's life. His choice of words makes it clear that his attachment to wealth is not ordinary; it has become an obsession and reflects his moral decline. The Cambridge text also confirms that the opening scene presents Volpone's treasure as something he venerates almost like a religious object.

Volpone goes on to describe the extraordinary power he believes wealth possesses:

"Riches, the dumb God, that giv'st all men tongues;
That canst do nought, and yet mak'st men do all things."
(Jonson, Volpone 1.1)

Here, Volpone describes money as a "God" that can influence and control human behavior. The contradiction in the statement that riches "canst do nought" but "mak'st men do all things" suggests that money has no power by itself, yet people willingly give it power over their actions and choices. Through Volpone's words, Jonson therefore moves beyond portraying greed as a personal weakness. He also draws attention to a society in which wealth can determine people's status, behavior, and even their moral decisions. This opening scene is therefore important for understanding Volpone as a character whose life is shaped by an excessive desire to possess and enjoy wealth.

This portrayal also supports the critical view that Volpone is more than a simple miser. He takes pleasure not only in having wealth but also in using it to influence and manipulate others. Hennessey's economic reading is particularly useful here because it connects Volpone's behavior with pleasure, consumption, and commodity culture (Hennessey 83–105). Volpone's greed, therefore, is not purely economic. It is also psychological, since his wealth becomes a source of pleasure, power, and control over other people.

## 2. **The Legacy Hunters: Greed as Inheritance**

While Volpone embodies greed through possession and pleasure, Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino embody greed through the desire to inherit. Their relationship with Volpone demonstrates how greed transforms human relationships into economic transactions.

Volpone's false illness is designed specifically to exploit the greed of these potential heirs. Mosca recognizes the effectiveness of their desire and observes that hope of inheritance is "such a bait" that it can conceal any "hook" (Jonson, *Volpone* 1.4). The metaphor is important: the legacy hunters are like fish attracted by bait. Their desire

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for wealth prevents them from recognizing the trap.Volpone himself ironically recognizes the destructive nature of their greed:

What a rare punishment
Is avarice to itself! …
O, thou art more than man,
That hast no need of anything" (Jonson 1.1).

The statement initially refers to the legacy hunters, whose greed makes them anxious, ridiculous, and vulnerable. Yet the line becomes dramatically ironic because it eventually applies to Volpone himself. His own excessive appetite contributes to his downfall. By pretending to be on his deathbed, Volpone transforms the vulnerability associated with dying into a deliberate performance through which he attempts to control his identity, property, and the expectations of the legacy hunters. Vinter's discussion of *Volpone* emphasizes the connection between dying, wealth, and the pursuit of financial gain, making Volpone's staged death central to Jonson's satire of avarice (Vinter 140–163). As Vinter's analysis suggests, Volpone's manipulation of death ultimately turns back upon him, making his apparent control over inheritance part of the mechanism of his own downfall. This is one of Jonson's most effective techniques: the greedy character unknowingly describes his own moral condition. Volpone believes that he is superior to the legacy hunters because he can manipulate their greed. However, he ultimately becomes subject to the same appetite for pleasure and domination.

### 3. **Animal Imagery and the Embodiment of Avarice**

Jonson's characterization in *Volpone* reinforces the theme of greed through animal imagery. Volpone's name means "fox," while Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino are associated with predatory birds. Their names transform them into symbolic embodiments of appetite and predation.The legacy hunters metaphorically gather around Volpone's supposed death like predators waiting for prey. Their behavior demonstrates that the pursuit of wealth has reduced their humanity. Rather than responding to Volpone as a sick human being, they respond to him as the owner of a valuable inheritance.

This technique supports Dutton's interpretation of *Volpone* as a satirical fable in which avarice distorts human character (Dutton 45). Rawashdeh similarly identifies the accumulation of wealth as a fundamental force in the play (Rawashdeh 57–62). The animal imagery makes this argument dramatically visible: greed turns supposedly civilized human beings into creatures governed by appetite.The contrast with *The Alchemist* is important. Jonson does not rely on animal names to the same extent in *The Alchemist*. Instead, he creates characters whose particular desires become exaggerated personality traits. In this sense, *Volpone* represents greed through animalized characterization, whereas *The Alchemist* represents it through social and psychological types.

### 4. **Greed, Luxury, and Pleasure in *Volpone***

Volpone's greed is not limited to the accumulation of money. His wealth gives him access to luxury, sensual pleasure, and power. This becomes particularly evident in his treatment of Celia. His wealth encourages him to believe that everything—including human affection—can be obtained through economic power.Mosca's description of Celia even connects her beauty to gold:

"Bright as your gold, and lovely as your gold!"(Jonson, *Volpone* 1.5)

The comparison is revealing because Celia is evaluated through the language of wealth. Gold becomes the standard against which beauty itself is measured. This supports Scott's interpretation of the play's relationship between wealth, luxury, consumption, and desire (Scott 11–15 ).

The connection between economic and sexual appetite is crucial to Jonson's presentation of greed. Volpone's material wealth produces a sense of entitlement: because he possesses money, he believes he can possess people. Greed therefore becomes a form of social and sexual domination.This makes Volpone's greed more dangerous than simple miserliness. He does not merely want to keep his wealth; he wants wealth to increase his capacity to control others.

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### 5. **The Alchemical Fantasy of Wealth in *The Alchemist***

While *Volpone* begins with accumulated gold, *The Alchemist* begins with the promise of creating gold. This difference is central to the comparative interpretation of greed. The fraudulent alchemical process creates the illusion that ordinary substances can be transformed into valuable ones. Subtle's technical language gives the deception an appearance of scientific authority. He describes the process in elaborate terms involving "materia liquida," "earth," "sulphur," and "quicksilver" (Jonson, *The Alchemist* 2.1). The Cambridge text shows how Subtle's technical vocabulary constructs the illusion of genuine scientific knowledge.

The philosopher's stone therefore becomes a powerful symbol of economic fantasy. It promises to transform something worthless into gold, just as the characters hope to transform their own lives through sudden wealth. Anne Barton's interpretation of alchemy as a metaphorical framework for human desire is particularly relevant here (Barton 136–153). Jonson uses alchemy not simply as a fraudulent science but as a metaphor for the human desire to escape ordinary economic and social limitations.Thus, while Volpone already possesses gold and wants more power from it, the characters of *The Alchemist* pursue the fantasy of transformation through gold.

### 6. **Sir Epicure Mammon: Greed as Excessive Fantasy**

Sir Epicure Mammon provides the clearest embodiment of excessive desire in *The Alchemist*. His name itself suggests appetite and material indulgence. Unlike Volpone, who possesses enormous wealth, Mammon is obsessed with the wealth he believes he will soon acquire.His imagination becomes increasingly extravagant:

"I will have all my beds blown up, not stuff'd; Down is too hard."(Jonson, *The Alchemist* 2.2)

Mammon does not stop at financial prosperity. He imagines luxurious rooms, sexual pleasure, expensive objects, servants, and unlimited sensual gratification. His greed therefore expands into a fantasy of total consumption. The Cambridge text records his extended vision of wealth in which he imagines that everything around him will become associated with gold. Later, Mammon declares:

"She shall feel gold, taste gold, hear gold, sleep gold;
Nay, we will concumbere gold."(Jonson, *The Alchemist* 4.1)

This extreme statement demonstrates that gold has become more than an economic object. It has invaded every dimension of Mammon's imagination—touch, taste, hearing, sleep, and sexuality. His greed has become almost totalizing. Recent study on *The Alchemist* has connected Mammon's imagery of inflation and excess with the desire to enlarge oneself economically and socially. The 2025 *BJHS Themes* discussion, for example, connects the play's "inflationary imagery" with the desire for economic and social self-expansion.Thus, Mammon parallels Volpone, but the difference is crucial: Volpone worships wealth that he possesses; Mammon worships wealth that he imagines possessing.

### 7. **Greed and Deception: Deceiver and Deceived**

A major similarity between the two plays is the relationship between greed and deception. In both works, deception succeeds because characters desperately want the false promises offered to them to be true.In *Volpone*, Volpone and Mosca deceive the legacy hunters by exploiting their expectation of inheritance. The potential heirs are not forced to participate in the deception. Their own greed draws them into it.

In *The Alchemist*, Subtle, Face, and Dol employ a similar strategy. They identify the particular desire of each visitor and then construct a performance designed to satisfy that desire. Dapper wants gambling success; Drugger seeks commercial prosperity; Mammon wants unlimited wealth; and other characters seek religious, sexual, or social benefits. This produces a fundamental similarity between the two plays: Greed creates the victim before the deceiver appears. The deceiver merely recognizes and exploits an already existing appetite. This supports Kim's argument that both the deceivers and their victims are implicated in the culture of greed (Kim 205–226 ). The relationship is therefore reciprocal: the fraudsters need greedy victims, while the victims need the fraudsters to make their fantasies appear possible.

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## 8. **Dramatic Irony and Greedy Blindness**

Jonson's use of dramatic irony is especially important in both plays. The audience often knows more than the greedy characters, allowing spectators to recognize the absurdity of their behavior. In *Volpone*, the audience knows that Volpone is not dying. Yet Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino behave as if his death is imminent. Their willingness to believe the false illness exposes their inability to think rationally because of their desire for inheritance.

The same technique operates in *The Alchemist*. The audience understands that Subtle and Face are performers and fraudsters, while the gulls continue to believe their claims. The audience therefore observes the difference between appearance and reality. The interpretation of *The Alchemist* is particularly relevant because it emphasizes deceptive language and performance as central elements of Jonson's dramatic method. The fraudsters do not simply lie; they perform identities that correspond to the desires of their victims. Dramatic irony therefore transforms greed into comedy. The audience laughs because it sees what the characters cannot see: their desires have made them ridiculous.

## 9. **Social Mobility and Economic Desire in *The Alchemist***

The representation of greed in *The Alchemist* extends beyond the desire for money. Characters seek wealth because they believe it will change their social identities.This is particularly clear in Mammon's fantasy. Wealth will give him luxury, sexual power, influence, and social prestige.

“If his dream last, he’ll turn the age to gold,
And make the earth look like another heaven,
As if it had been wash’d in a river of gold” (Jonson, Act 1, Scene 3).

The imagery of “gold” and a “river of gold” reveals Mammon’s excessive attachment to material wealth. His vision of making “the earth” resemble “another heaven” demonstrates how greed distorts his perception of reality: he imagines earthly existence becoming heavenly through the possession of gold.Similarly, Drugger's interest in magical and commercial assistance reflects his desire for economic advancement.

Thus, greed becomes connected with social mobility. The characters do not simply want money; they want what money promises to make them. This differs somewhat from *Volpone*. The legacy hunters are primarily interested in acquiring Volpone's fortune, while *The Alchemist* presents wealth as a mechanism of self-transformation. Jonson therefore broadens the meaning of greed from possession to aspiration. Hwan's economic reading of *The Alchemist* is useful here because it interprets alchemy as a metaphor for economic fantasy and the transformation of value (Hwan 189–224). The characters believe that money can solve personal and social problems, but Jonson reveals that this belief itself makes them vulnerable.

## 10. **Greed and the Destruction of Human Relationships**

Both plays demonstrate that greed becomes particularly destructive when it enters human relationships. In *Volpone*, Corvino's treatment of Celia shows how economic desire can corrupt marriage. His concern for financial advantage becomes stronger than his concern for marital dignity. He says to Volpone to have his property.

“I would not have you die;
But, for my own sake, I would have you live” (Jonson 2.5). Corbaccio similarly allows inheritance to interfere with paternal responsibility. The result is a world in which people increasingly become economic objects. Volpone sees Celia through the language of possession; the legacy hunters see Volpone through the language of inheritance.Economic approaches to *Volpone* further situate Jonson's representation of greed within the commercial culture of early modern England. Ladegaard examines the play in relation to contemporary debates about luxury and argues that Volpone's taste for luxury and the means through which he acquires it are both morally and economically damaging. His analysis places Jonson's comedy within the expanding commercial culture of early modern London, where luxury consumption

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generated both fascination and anxiety (Ladegaard 63–71).

In *The Alchemist*, relationships are also transactional. Subtle, Face, and Dol cooperate because they expect financial benefits from deception, but their partnership becomes unstable when questions of profit and control emerge. The gulls likewise approach the alchemical household because they believe it can provide economic or personal advantage.The theme of social advancement further complicates the representation of greed in *The Alchemist*. Jonson's characters seek wealth not only for material comfort but also for social mobility and personal transformation. Bull argues that Jonson's use of medieval faerie-romance motifs provides a framework for exploring "greed, social mobility, and new wealth" in the play (Bull 206–226) Jonson therefore demonstrates in both plays that greed undermines trust, loyalty, family, marriage, and friendship.

### 11. **Satire: Making Greed Ridiculous**

Jonson's greatest weapon against greed is satire. Rather than simply telling audiences that greed is immoral, he makes greedy behavior ridiculous. The legacy hunters in *Volpone* are comic because they compete over a dying man's fortune while the audience knows that the illness is false. Their excessive eagerness exposes their lack of dignity. Similarly, Mammon's extravagant fantasies in *The Alchemist* are comic because they grow far beyond reasonable expectations. His dream of turning everything into gold becomes so excessive that the audience recognizes the absurdity of his materialism.In *The Alchemist*, Ben Jonson uses deception not merely for comic entertainment but also to educate his audience about human weaknesses. Park argues that Jonson "advocated the educational benefit of theatre" (285). This suggests that the play's satire encourages spectators to recognize deception, greed, and gullibility in society.

Jonson's satire therefore works through exaggeration. He takes ordinary human desires—money, comfort, status, pleasure—and intensifies them until they become grotesque. This supports the argument, cited in the present study, that Jonsonian comedy functions as a form of social correction by exposing human folly .The audience laughs at the characters but is also encouraged to examine the human desires represented by them.

### 12. **Greed as Self-Punishment**

Perhaps the strongest similarity between the two plays is that greed ultimately becomes self-destructive. In *Volpone*, Volpone's own statement—

"What a rare punishment
Is avarice to itself!"(Jonson, *Volpone* 1.4)

He believes he is commenting on the legacy hunters, but the play ultimately demonstrates that his own greed will punish him. His desire for one final triumph over his victims helps create the conditions for his exposure. Critical commentary similarly identifies the line as an ironic judgment that eventually applies to Volpone himself. In *The Alchemist*, the victims' greed leads them into fraud, while the fraudsters' own greed eventually threatens their successful deception. Spyra examines greed and other vices, placing the play's fraudulent and supernatural elements within its broader satirical treatment of human weaknesses (Spyra 292–313) .The entire system depends upon temporary manipulation and therefore cannot remain stable. Jonson's moral structure can consequently be represented as: Excessive desire → blindness → deception → exploitation → disorder → punishment. This pattern appears in both plays, although it operates through different plots.

## Comparative Synthesis

A comparison of *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* reveals several important similarities as well as differences in the way Ben Jonson presents greed. In both plays, greed drives characters to deceive others and make morally questionable choices, but the form it takes and the circumstances surrounding it are different.

- Primary form of greed: In *Volpone*, greed is mainly connected with wealth, inheritance, and luxury. In *The Alchemist*, it is more closely related to the desire for

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sudden wealth, social advancement, and personal transformation.

- Main embodiment of greed: In *Volpone*, Volpone and the legacy hunters represent different forms of excessive desire for money and inheritance. In *The Alchemist*, characters such as Mammon, Subtle, Face, Dol Common, and the gulls reveal greed through their pursuit of wealth, status, and personal advantage.
- Symbol of desire: Gold is the strongest symbol of desire in *Volpone*, representing the value that the characters place on material wealth. In *The Alchemist*, the philosopher's stone and the idea of alchemy represent the dream of producing unlimited wealth and changing one's life.
- Nature of wealth: The characters in *Volpone* are primarily interested in wealth that already exists, especially Volpone's fortune and the inheritance they hope to receive. In *The Alchemist*, wealth is largely imagined or promised through fraudulent schemes and the false hope of creating riches.
- Main form of deception: In *Volpone*, deception centers on Volpone's false illness and the legacy hunters' attempts to secure his inheritance. In *The Alchemist*, deception takes the form of fraudulent alchemy, false promises, disguises, and elaborate performances.
- Weakness of the victims: The victims in *Volpone* are mainly driven by their desire to inherit Volpone's wealth. In *The Alchemist*, the gulls are attracted by different desires, including money, social status, power, and the hope of transforming their lives.
- Dramatic techniques: Jonson uses animal imagery and dramatic irony particularly effectively in *Volpone* to expose the greed of his characters. In *The Alchemist*, he relies more heavily on performance, disguise, role-playing, satire, and dramatic irony to reveal human gullibility and selfishness.
- Social criticism: In *Volpone*, greed damages personal relationships and even influences people's ideas about justice and morality. In *The Alchemist*, the desire for quick wealth creates an environment where gullibility and exploitation can flourish.
- Ultimate consequence: In *Volpone*, the characters' greed eventually leads to exposure, loss, and punishment. In *The Alchemist*, the fraudulent schemes eventually fall apart, leaving the characters to face the consequences of their actions.
- Central message: Overall, *Volpone* suggests that simply possessing wealth cannot satisfy a person whose desire for more is excessive. *The Alchemist*, on the other hand, shows how the dream of unlimited wealth can make people deceive themselves as well as others.

The comparison of the two plays shows that Jonson presents greed in different ways while maintaining a clear concern with its harmful effects. In *Volpone*, greed comes mainly from possession. Volpone already has considerable wealth, but his desire for more pleasure, power, and control continues to grow. In *The Alchemist*, greed is driven more by expectation. The characters are attracted to the idea of becoming wealthy because they believe money will improve their lives, raise their social position, or give them a new identity. As Ahn's comparative study points out, greed is an important theme in both *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, reflecting Jonson's continuing interest in how excessive desire can lead to deception, corruption, and personal destruction (Ahn 25–35).

## Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610) demonstrates that greed functions as both a psychological weakness and a pervasive social pathology. In *Volpone*, greed is expressed through the worship of gold, inheritance, luxury, and possession, while in *The Alchemist* it appears through fantasies of sudden wealth, social advancement, and transformation. Volpone's declaration that gold is his "Saint" and Mammon's desire to "feel gold, taste gold, hear gold, sleep

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gold" illustrate how material desire can become an object of worship and an all-consuming fantasy (Jonson, *Volpone* 1.1; *The Alchemist* 4.1). Although *Volpone* primarily critiques the possession and domination associated with wealth, whereas *The Alchemist* exposes speculative fantasies of economic and social transformation, both plays demonstrate that excessive desire distorts reason, morality, and human relationships. Jonson's use of satire, characterization, dramatic irony, and deception further establishes greed as fundamentally self-destructive. In both plays, excessive desire produces moral blindness, making individuals vulnerable to manipulation while encouraging them to manipulate others. The resulting comedy therefore functions as social criticism, exposing a culture in which wealth, status, and material success increasingly shape human value (Dutton; Hennessey 83–105; Barton; Hwan 189–224). Ultimately, this study argues that greed is the central mechanism connecting *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*: it transforms people into predators, victims, commodities, and manipulators, while eventually turning against those who pursue it. Jonson's statement, "What a rare punishment / Is avarice to itself!" captures this moral paradox (*Volpone* 1.4). His enduring insight is that wealth becomes destructive when it ceases to be a means of living and becomes the measure of human worth.

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