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## **Ben Jonson - Mercury Vindicated**

This is a masque by the playwright Ben Jonson entitled *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, which was performed on Jan 1st and 6th, 1616. It is not often appreciated that Ben Jonson, although well known for his play the Alchemist of 1611, also wrote a number of these allegorical (often satirical) masques for the Court. It shows that alchemical ideas had in the first decades of the 17th century penetrated to a great extent into the culture of that time.

### **Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court**

By Gentlemen, the King's Servants.

*After the loud music, the scene discovered, being a laboratory, or alchemist's workhouse; Vulcan looking to the registers, while a Cyclope, tending the fire, to the cornets began to sing.*

**Cyclope.** Soft, subtile fire, thou soul of art,  
Now do thy part  
On weaker Nature, that through age is lamed.  
Take but thy time, now she is old,  
And the sun her friend grown cold,  
She will no more in strife with thee be named.  
Look but how few confess her now  
In cheek or brow !  
From every head, almost, how she is frightened !  
The very age abhors her so  
That it learns to speak and go  
As if by art alone it could be righted.

*The song ended, Mercury appeared, thrusting out his head and afterward his body at the tunnel of the middle furnace, which, Vulcan espying, cried out to the Cyclope.*

**Vulcan.** Stay, see! our Mercury is coming forth; art and all the elements assist. Call forth our philosophers. He will be gone, he will evaporate. Dear Mercury ! Help ! He flies. He is 'scaped. Precious golden Mercury, be fixed; be not so volatile. Will none of the sons of art appear ?

*In which time Mercury, having run once or twice about the room, takes breath and speaks.*

**Mercury.** Now the place and goodness of it protect me. One tender-hearted creature or other save Mercury and free him. Ne'er an old gentlewoman i' the house that has a

wrinkle about her to hide me in? I could run into a serving-woman's pocket now, her glove, any little hole. Some merciful farthingale among so many be bounteous and undertake me: I will stand close up anywhere to escape this polt-footed philosopher, old Smug here of Lemnos, and his smoky family. Has he given me time to breathe? O the variety of torment that I have endured in the reign of the Cyclops, beyond the most exquisite wit of tyrans. The whole household of 'em are become alchemists (since their trade of armor-making failed them) only to keep themselves in fire for this winter; for the mischief of a secret that they know, above the consuming of coals and drawing of usquebagh. Howsoever they may pretend under the specious names of Geber, Amold, Lully, Bombast of Hohenheim to commit miracles in art and treason again' nature. And as if the title of philosopher, that creature of glory, were to be fetched out of a furnace, abuse the curious and credulous nation of metal-men through the world, and make Mercury their instrument. I am their crude and their sublimate, their precipitate and their unctuous, their male and their female, sometimes their hermaphrodite; what they list to style me. It is I that am corroded and exalted and sublimed and reduced and fetched over and filtered and washed and wiped; what between their salts and their sulfurs, their oils and their tartars, their brines and their vinegars, you might take me out now a soused Mercury, now a salted Mercury, now a smoked and dried Mercury, now a powdered and pickled Mercury: never herring, oyster, or cucumber passed so many vexations; my whole life with 'em hath been an exercise of torture; one, two, three, four and five times an hour ha' they made me dance the philosophical circle, like an ape through a hoop, or a dog in a wheel. I am their turn-spit indeed: they eat or smell no roast meat but in my name. I am their bill of credit still, that passes for their victuals and house-room. It is through me they ha' got this corner o' the court to cozen in, where they shark for a hungry diet below stairs, and cheat upon your under-officers, promising mountains for their meat, and all upon Mercury's security. A poor page o' the larder they have made obstinately believe he shall be physician for the household next summer; they will give him a quantity of the quintessence, shall serve him to cure kibes, or the mormal o' the shin, take away the pustules i' the nose, and Mercury is engaged for it. A child o' the scullery steals all their coals for 'em too, and he is bid sleep secure, he shall find a corner o' the philosophers' stone for't under his bolster one day, and have the proverb inverted. Against which, one day I am to deliver the buttery in, so many firkins of aurum potable as it delivers out bombards of budge to them between this and that. For the pantry, they are at a certainty with me, and keep a tally: an ingot, a loaf, or a wedge of some five pound weight, which is a thing of nothing, a trifle. And so the blackguard are pleased with a toy, a lease of life (for some 999), especially those o' the boiling house: they are to have Medea's kettle hung up, that they may souse into it when they will and come out renewed like so many stripped snakes at their pleasure. But these are petty engagements, and (as I said) below the stairs; marry, above here, perpetuity of beauty (do you hear, ladies?), health, riches, honors, a matter of immortality is nothing. They will calcine you a grave matron (as it might be a mother o' the maids) and spring up a young virgin out of her ashes, as fresh as a phoenix; lay you an old courtier o' the coals like a sausage or a bloat-herring, and after they ha' broiled him enough, blow a soul into him with a pair of bellows till he start up into his galliard that was made when Monsieur was here. They profess familiarly to melt down all the old sinners o' the suburbs once in half a year into fresh gamesters again. Get all the cracked maidenheads and cast 'em into new ingots; half

the wenches o' the town are alchemy. Sec, they begin to muster again and draw their forces out against me! The genius of the place defend me ! You that are both the Sol and Jupiter of this sphere, Mercury invokes your majesty against the sooty tribe here; for in your favor only I grow recovered and warm.

*At which time Vulcan entering with a troupe of threadbare alchemists prepares them to the first antimasque.*

**Vulcan.** Begin your charm, sound music, circle him in and take him: if he will not obey, bind him.

*They all danced about Mercury with variety of changes, whilst he defends himself with his caduceus, and after the dance spake.*

**Mercury.** It is in vain, Vulcan, to pitch your net in the sight of the fowl thus: I am no sleepy Mars to be caught i' your subtile toils. I know what your aims are, sir, to tear the wings from my head and heels, and lute me up in a glass with my own seals, while you might wrest the caduceus out of my hand to the adultery and spoil of Nature, and make your accesses by it to her dishonor more easy. Sir, would you believe it should be come to that height of impudence in mankind that such a nest of fire-worms as these are (because their patron Mulciber heretofore has made stools stir and statues dance, a dog of brass to bark, and--which some will say was his worst act--a woman to speak) should therefore with their heats called balnei cineris, or horse dung, profess to outwork the sun in virtue and contend to the great act of generation, nay, almost creation ? It is so, though. For in yonder vessels which you see in their laboratory they have enclosed materials to produce men, beyond the deeds of Deucalion or Prometheus (of which one, they say, had the philosophers' stone and threw it over his shoulder, the other the fire, and lost it). And what men are they, they are so busy about, think you? Not common or ordinary creatures, but of rarity and excellence, such as the times wanted and the age had a special deal of need of: such as there was a necessity they should be artificial, for nature could never have thought or dreamt o' their composition. I can remember some o' their titles to you, and the ingredients: do not look for Paracelsus' man among 'em, that he promised you out of white bread and deal-wine, for he never came to light. But of these, let me see; the first that occurs, a master of the duel, a carrier of the differencies. To him went spirit of ale, a good quantity, with the amalgama of sugar and nutmegs, oil of oaths, sulfur of quarrel, strong waters, valor precipitate, vapored o'er the helm with tobacco, and the rosin of Mars with a dram o' the business, for that's the word of tincture, the business. Let me alone with the business, I will carry the business. I do understand the business. I do find an affront i' the business. Then another is a fencer i' the mathematics, or the town's cunning man, a creature of art too; a supposed secretary to the stars, but indeed, a kind of lying intelligencer from those parts. His materials, if I be not deceived, were juice of almanacs, extraction of ephemerides, scales of the globe, filings of figures, dust o' the twelve houses, conserve of questions, salt of confederacy, a pound of adventure, a grain of skill, and a drop of truth. I saw vegetals too, as well as minerals, put into one glass there, as adder's tongue, title-bane, niter of clients, tartar of false conveyance, aurum palpabile, with a huge deal of talk, to which they added tincture of conscience with the feces of

honesty; but for what this was I could not learn, only I have overheard one o' the artists say, out o' the corruption of a lawyer was the best generation of a broker in suits: whether this were he or no, I know not.

**Vulcan.** Thou art a scorner, Mercury, and out of the pride of thy protection here mak'st it thy study to revile art, but it will turn to thine own contumely soon. Call forth the creatures of the first class and let them move to the harmony of our heat, till the slanderer have sealed up his own lips to his own torment.

**Mercury.** Let 'em come, let 'em come, I would not wish a greater punishment to thy impudence.

*There enters the second antimasque of imperfect creatures, with helms of limbeck on their heads, whose dance ended, Mercury proceeded.*

[**Mercury.**] Art thou not ashamed, Vulcan, to offer in defense of thy fire and art, against the excellence of the sun and Nature, creatures more imperfect than the very flies and insects that are her trespasses and scapes? Vanish with thy insolence, thou and thy impostors, and all mention of you melt before the majesty of this light, whose Mercury henceforth I profess to be, and never again the philosophers'. Vanish, I say, that all who have but their senses may see and judge the difference between thy ridiculous monsters and his absolute features.

*At which the whole scene changed to a glorious bower wherein Nature was placed with Prometheus at her feet, and the twelve masquers standing about them. After they had been a while viewed, Prometheus descended and Nature after him, singing.*

**Nature.** How young and fresh am I tonight,  
To see't kept day by so much light,  
And twelve my sons stand in their maker's sight!  
Help, wise Prometheus, something must be done  
To show they are the creatures of the sun,  
That each to other  
Is a brother,

And Nature here no stepdame, but a mother

**Chorus.** Come forth, come forth, Prove all the numbers then  
That make perfection up, and may absolve you men.

[**Nature.**] But show thy winding ways and arts,  
Thy risings and thy timely starts  
Of stealing fire from ladies' eyes and hearts.

Those softer circles are the young man's heaven,  
And there more orbs and planets are than seven,  
To know whose motion

Were a notion

As worthy of youth's study as devotion.

**Chorus.** Come forth, come forth, prove all the time will gain,  
For Nature bids the best, and never bade in vain.

*The first dance, after which this song.*

**Prometheus.** How many 'mongst these ladies here  
Wish now they such a mother were !

**Nature.** Not one, I fear,  
And read it in their laughters.

There's more, I guess, would wish to be my daughters.

**Prometheus.** You think they would not be so old  
For so much glory.

**Nature.** I think that thought so told  
Is no false piece of story.

'Tis yet with them but beauty's noon,  
They would not grandams be too soon.

**Prometheus.** Is that your sex's humor?

'Tis then since Niobe was changed that they have left that tumor.

**Chorus.** Move, move again in forms as heretofore.

**Nature.** 'Tis form allures.

Then move; the ladies here are store.

**Prometheus.** Nature is motion's mother, as she is yours;

**Chorus.** The spring whence order flows, that all directs,  
And knits the causes with th'effects.

*The main dance. Then dancing with the ladies; then their last dance. After which,  
Prometheus calls to them in song.*

**Prometheus.** What, ha' you done  
So soon?

And can you from such beauty part?

You'll do a wonder more than I.

I woman with her ills did fly,

But you their good and them deny.

**Chorus.** Sure, each hath left his heart

In pawn to come again, or else he durst not start.

**Nature.** They are loath to go,

I know,

Or sure they are no sons of mine.

There is no banquet, boys, like this,

If you hope better, you will miss;

Stay here, and take each one a kiss.

**Chorus.** Which if you can refine

The taste knows no such cates, nor yet the palate wine.

No cause of tarrying shun:

They are not worth his light, go backward from the sun.