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The 'er...' as one of Ben Jonson's composition techniques?

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Jonson can be dismissive of explanations that link pictures and words. Over the 1604 royal entry into London, for instance, he says that it could not

stand with the dignitie of these shewes (after the most miserable and desperate shift of the Puppits) to require a Truch-man, or (with the ignorant Painter) one to write, *This is a dog*; or, *This is a hare*: but so to be presented, as upon the view, they might, without cloud, or obscuritie, declare themselves to the sharpe and learned: And for the multitude, no doubt but their grounded judgements did gaze, said it was fine, and were satisfied.¹

Nonetheless, in *The Alchemist* (acted in 1610), Subtle cranks out just such a shop sign for Drugger:

He first shall have a bell, that's ABEL;

And, by it, standing one, whose name is DEE,

In a rugg gowne; there's *D.* and *rug*, that's DRUG:

And, right anenst him, a Dog snarling ER;

There's DRUGGER, ABEL DRUGGER. That's his signe.²

¹ B. Jonson, *The Works*, ed. C.H. Herford, P. Simpson, and E. Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-52), p. 91.

² Jonson, *The Alchemist* (2.6.19-24), in *Works*, 5.338.

This parody of the creative process follows Subtle working his way along the graphemes in Drugger's name, rapidly alternating between letters ('a', 'D') and rebuses ('bell', 'Dee', 'rug'). All goes well until he comes to the fifth component, when he is lost for words ('er') – a pause that, happily, then gives him the sound he wants ('er'). But what gives Subtle the idea for a metonym of the dog, whose snarl turns out to be a useful onomatopoeia?

In 1631, excusing a delay in printing *The Devil is an Ass*, Jonson told the Earl of Newcastle that

My Printer [John Beale], and I, shall afford subject enough for a Tragi-Comedy. for with his delays and vexation, I am almost become blind, and if Heaven be so just in the Metamorphosis, to turne him into that Creature hee most assimilates, a Dog with a Bell to lead mee betweene Whitehall and my lodging, I may bid the world good Night.³

Guide dogs used by blind people were belled, to ensure their owners could locate them and to alert passers-by to be careful. In *The Alchemist*, Jonson is free-associating: a bell recalls a dog, used by or instead of someone blinded by a metamorphosed Subtle, who is being a Dee for Drugger.

³ Jonson, *Works*, 1.211.