

### A Sly Joke in *The Alchemist*?

Kastril or Kestrel, the ‘angry boy’ of Ben Jonson’s *Alchemist*, calls his sister his ‘suster’ and says ‘kuss’ for ‘kiss’.<sup>1</sup> It is not clear whether this is meant to represent a particular regional dialect, a generalized country accent, or his own personal idiolect: commentators are mostly content to gloss both words for the unwary.<sup>2</sup> In IV.iv.91, he reveals his sister’s formal name, Dame Pliant, and in V.iii.38 her first name or (more likely) nickname, when he refers to her as ‘Puss, my suster’. I wonder whether that name contains a sly joke. If he says that his ‘suster’ is named ‘Puss’, does that imply that, in the usual pronunciations of the day, his ‘sister’ would be named ‘Piss’?

Of course, just because Kastril sometimes turns I into U does not mean that every U he speaks would be an I in other dialects and idiolects. Still, I doubt that it is entirely coincidental that Jonson gives Dame Pliant a name that is so amusingly obscene if we assume the same vowel-change as in ‘suster’ and ‘kuss’ and translate it back into standard English. I certainly laughed out loud when I first saw the play at the Blackfriars in Staunton in January of 2010 and heard Tyler Moss as Kastril say the line. Then again, Kastril also calls his suster a ‘punk device’ a few lines further on (V.iii.50), and taking ‘punk’ as a mispronunciation of ‘pink’ doesn’t seem to add anything, even with at least four different Early Modern English meanings of ‘pink’ and ‘pinked’ to work with.<sup>3</sup> So perhaps the joke I thought I heard was the product of coincidence, not a morsel of Jonsonian wit.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eleven times and twice, respectively, if I have counted right. Specific line references follow the numeration of Martin Butler’s edition: *Selected Plays of Ben Jonson*, Volume 2, Cambridge 1989. I will update them if and when I acquire Herford and Simpson’s collected edition.

<sup>2</sup> Probably not the first: if anyone has tried to identify a region in Jonson’s England in which everyone spoke that way, I have not seen it.

<sup>3</sup> Schmidt’s *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary* gives “a nonpareil; a nonesuch” and the flower for the noun, “winking, half-shut” (but not the color) for the adjective, and “pierced in small holes, reticulated” for the participle ‘pinked’.

<sup>4</sup> Actors and directors have to decide whether to make the U sound in ‘kuss’ and ‘suster’ resemble that in ‘put’, ‘push’, and ‘Puss’, or that in ‘putt’, ‘gut’, and ‘cut’. My joke works better with the former, and that is the one Moss used in the Blackfriars production.