

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

The Volpone (1640)

Ben Jonson

OVERVIEW

The tenor of the play Jonson creates his own background for the present play: his theory of humours, which has its own roots in mediaeval medicine, and its development in pre modern psychology. The excess of one or another humour—dry, moist, wet—or another strongly inflects one's personality, and establishes what we can think of as our distinctive character. To explain the evolution of the notion of 'character' in English literature will be a winding journey, which takes us from Chaucer to Swift to Dickens, and exposes us to many distinctive visions onto the evolving directions of the character trait in English culture. Jonson, with his *Volpone* and with *Morose* (in *Epicene*), introduces us to two 'grumpy old men' who fall into the pit of Jonson's satire, and never emerge from there. Each of them has said a lifelong no to the communitarian world, and each has developed distorted character traits. They are both in a 'bad humour.'

Each of these retiring figures is given a place to be what he is—a city environment, British or Italian—in which interpersonal actions will be unavoidable, but in which the individual adjustment will be unique—a fixation on silence, a preoccupation with death, power and money, The main figure of *Volpone*, *Volpone* himself, is fixed around gold, money and power together, and that crossroads of the two, attractive women, who seem to be part of the power complex of modern societies.

Both *Morose* and *Volpone* lack an important ingredient of being in the human condition ingredient, a condition of belonging and participating, and in the play *Volpone* this missing component is the very electricity of the human. *Volpone*, the fox, is in myth-imagination-fact not human but a part of the animal world; that part of it which we share with our animal brothers and sisters. For the 'civilized' imagination of Jonson's time, the bestial attributions of *Volpone* (a fox), *Mosca* (the fly), *Voltore* (the vulture), *Corbaccio* (the raven) *Corvino* (the carrion crow), do all they can to express the bestiality of their name bearers, in fact to express a particular kind of bestiality, that of species of crow flesh devouring flies, and raven which are noted for their feeding off 'carrion.' Jonson pulls no punches, in characterizing the major figures in the present play. *Aristophanes*, *Erasmus*, *Pope*, and *Swift* move through the same brutal waters of sarcasm and contempt. Jonson excels at employing this heavy symbolism to undergird the comedy of his sarcasm.

CHARACTERS

Volpone, a magnifico; of Venetian nobility, His personality evolves throughout the play, and finally shipwrecks on its own lack of direction and organization

Mosca, his parasite; bodyguard and collaborator in varied plots. Seemingly a buddy to *Volpone* *Mosca* turns out to be a false and dangerous friend, truly a parasite.

Voltore, an advocate; eager for a cut of *Volpone*'s inheritance; old grasping Venetian nobility *Corbaccio* , an old gentleman

Corvino, a merchant; a business man, before all interested in money; father of *Bonario*, husband of *Celia*. *Avocatori*, four magistrates

Notario, the register

Nano, a dwarf (with the eunuch and the hermaphrodite, a significantly sterile offspring of *Volpone*'s erotic life)

Castrone, a eunuch

Sir Politic Would be, a knight and would be world traveler

Peregrine, a gentleman traveler; a new type of fake sophisticate

Bonario, young gentleman (son of Corbaccio)

Madame Would be, the knight's wife

Celia, the merchant's wife; easy to look at, but particular who she sleeps with

Commendatori, officers.

Mercatori, three merchants

Androgyno, an hermaphrodite

Servitore, a servant

Crowd

Women

SYNOPSIS

An elderly Venetian gentleman, who is deeply in love with his gold, wants more of the beautiful stuff. He devises a plan. He lets it be known that he is on his deathbed. Wealthy friends, hoping to be included in Volpone's will, visit him, one after the other, bearing splendid gifts. Their expectation is that Volpone will reward them by including them in his will. Volpone's plan is abetted by his parasite servant, Mosca (the fly.)

While Volpone's situation is unfolding, he learns from Mosca that Corvino, one of Volpone's ardent inheritance-seeking friends, has a beautiful wife, Celia. Volpone gets a look at the lady and is enchanted. Mosca helps to set up a bedside rendez-vous which is taking a promising bedroom direction, when Bonario, Corvino's son, aware that his dad is planning to disinherit him, arrives in time to observe the scene about to transpire between his mother and the rapacious Volpone. Volpone barely gets out of the scrape before being accused of rape. Dirty legal work, and Mosca's unscrupulous interventions, save Volpone's skin. We are by now totally disabused of any of the gentler emotions toward Volpone.

Jonson invigorates his dark tale by introducing a la mode British travelers, Sir and Lady Politic Would be and Peregrine. A great deal of in talk transpires among these three travelers, sitting ducks for the satire made possible by the just commencing pre-modern world of the traveler; figures ripe for mockery on the Restoration stage, as the first glimpses of the travel 'industry' begin to make their appearance.

Volpone extricates himself from the nearly disastrous denouement of the event with Celia, and the ensuing rage of Bonario, the son of Corvino and Celia. At this point, however, Volpone gives another turn to his character. (He had surprised us, initially, by the decision to fake a nearly fatal illness, and then to punctuate the pretence by a real lusty attraction to Celia.)

Volpone now decides to proclaim his own death, and to announce that he has willed his fortune to Mosca, a decision which enrages the previous pretenders to the fortunes of Volpone. As it happens, this trick of Volpone ends up badly for him, thanks to the final refusal of Mosca to play ball with his master's plans. Mosca likes being rich, and refuses to accept the fact that he is not rich. 'Did I inherit or not?' asks Mosca. Court battles follow, in the course of which both Mosca and Volpone are severely punished, and the law prevails. While appropriate retribution is handed out by the justice system, the inward punishment to the vitriolic Volpone is the cruelest. He proves to be an inwardly sequestered individual with a volatile personality which makes him unfit for society. Jonson, like Shakespeare in Hamlet, Lear, or Richard II, is a subtle master of depicting socially off centered eccentrics.

SCENES

From the outset, with Volpone rapt in adoration of his coffers of gold in the glistening morning sun, we know that Jonson has once again, as in *Epicene or the Alchemist*, put his finger on a twisted and quirky psyche. The protagonists of these three plays share a cynical gift for disregarding others, or for interposing uncomfortable restrictions on others. The characters are all egomaniacs with a limited

capacity to foresee the consequences of their own behavior and with an ultimate down fall which they have prepared for themselves. The defining events in the twisted lives accordingly begin square in the midst of their aberrations

From the start we see the complexity of Volpone's character. He is a sensualist for gold, yet at the same time an accumulator, concerned not just with the brilliance of this sunny character, but with the power his gold enables him to exercise over others. There is a close relation between his sense of the power of gold and of the power gold gives him.

It is a small step from this power complex of Volpone to his sudden desire to make love to the wife of Corvino, fired up as he is by the mere description of this beauty, whom he has never met. So far is Volpone from the moribund condition in which he portrays himself that he is immediately wired for action, upon learning of this lady, who will, as we can well understand, have no feeling but repugnance for Volpone.

Volpone is, therefore, a rapidly self-modifying personality. The next dramatic move, that springs from his propensity to alter himself, is what he makes of himself after having been humiliated at law in the aftermath of his assault on Corvino's wife. He decides to remake himself, once again, by creating a false identity for himself. Through his parasite, Mosca, he lets the rumor be circulated that he, Volpone, has passed away. Here he is drawn back, again, to the temptation to play with his existence, in order to manipulate others. Is it an inherent drive for revenge that triggers this strong interest in self-play that marks Volpone's behavior? Is the resentment of others, on Volpone's part, simply a desire to possess all the gold in the world?

We return to the classical notion of the comic, that kind of rustic spoof which we feel able to track back into some of its originals in pre fifth century Greek culture, and find cropping up in Elizabethan Mid-summer Night's Dream country plays, or long ago in the bloody comedies of Ishtar in Sumeria.

THEMES

Lust Jonson's sorn for public vices turns especially around greed and lust, two of the cardinal sins of orthodox Christian tradition. Lust tends to mean exaggerated longing, frequently sexual. We know that Volpone has faked his debility, but may be surprised that he has given full rein to his sexual desires, after having been told, by Mosca, of the beautiful wife of Corvino, one of the suppliants for Volpone's will. Mosca is called on to facilitate a rendez vous. Etc. All is well ezcept that nothing works out for Volpone. Our point, however, is different. It is the perennial power of sexual desire, which once more, here, folds back destructively onto itself, crippling itself. Sexuality, greed, and power turn out be bedfellows.

Greed Greed is a pervasive theme in world literature. It is one of the cardinal sins in Christian tradition, and is hotly assaulted in all the major religions, where it is correctly chastised as a manifestation of love aborted, the worth of the other scorned, and the priority of the self crudely prioritized. Volpone himself is inverted onto himself. He wants above all to continue receiving precious gifts, from the leeches haunting him on what they assume is his death bed. To maintain this gift flow, he needs to sustain the impression that he is in fact dying, thus in the process of deserving final rites of respect and attention.

Deception Volpone's governing ruse is deception. Except for Mosca, his parasite, Volpone has no one in whom to confide, except his parasite-servant, who only to a certain extent has the same interests as Volpone. Thus Volpone is open to deception by all his visitors, about whose motives he is himself completely in the dark. Are lust and greed, these two trigger passions of Volpone, related to his readiness to deceive? Deception is the pathway through which to satisfy lust and greed while all three states of being are intertwined, one is a platform for the realization of the other two. Thus are the elements of our universal considition powerful underpinnings of one another, for good or evil.

Power Volpone's longing for power is closely interrelated with his desire for sexual control and satisfaction, as well as with his drive for money. From the flirst lines of the play we realize that Volpone is obsessed by the passion to control his gold. He views it as a precious lover might, wandering around his

bedroom caressing the golden brilliance of the metal piled provocatively around his room. Wealthy though he is, he would never be satisfied until he replaced himself by gold.

Old Age Volpone is all desire, greed, and longing, and yet even if his power is increased he has no power to combat the old age which is encroaching on his desires and on his capacity to satisfy them. The theme of the inevitability of death pervades great literature and art—and not infrequently takes us down paths of insight: into rooms ‘sans eyes sans teeth sans everything,’ as Shakespeare brutally expressed it, into the everyday but amazing last day of Tolstoy’s *Death of Ivan Ilyitch*; into the sassy face of Mr. Death mocking his ‘blue eyed boy,’ in W.C. Williams’ poem addressed to our fragility.