Volpone Study Guide

Volpone by Ben Jonson

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Contents

Introduction

Jonson was a serious classicist who modeled his plays on classic Roman and Greek tragedies. Jonson thought that the poet had a moral function to educate, and the purpose of *Volpone* is to teach lessons about greed. The topic is quite serious, although this is comedy, and there are many moments of humor in the play, especially when Volpone is feigning illness and lies disguised. This play is, in many ways, a play within a play. Volpone and Mosca are actors playing roles throughout, but they are also directors leading the three fortune hunters, Corvino, Voltore, and Corbaccio, through their performances. Jonson differed from other playwrights of the period in that he did not use old stories, fables, or histories as the sources for his plays. Instead, Jonson used a plot "type" as the source for most of his plays. In *Volpone,* the plot is the familiar one of a swindle. The action is set in Venice, which many Englishmen thought was a center of debauchery and sin. Jonson's characters are not well defined, nor do they have any depth. Instead, they are "types" familiar to the audience: the dishonest lawyer, the jealous old husband married to a beautiful young girl, and the miserly old man who cannot be satisfied until he can amass even more money.

Volpone was first performed in 1605. Since there were no reviews, the audience's exact reaction cannot be known. But we do know from letters and diaries that Jonson was not popular with audiences. His plays provided morals and tended to preach to the audience, something they resented. William Shakespeare's plays were much more popular, since they set out to entertain, and this fact was not lost on Jonson, who is credited with being privately annoyed at Shakespeare. *Volpone* is considered Jonson's most popular work, since it is the one most frequently staged.

Author Biography

Jonson was born in about 1572. The date is uncertain since Elizabethans were very casual about the recording of exact dates. He was a scholar, a poet, and a dramatist. Jonson was born near London shortly after the death of his father. He was educated at Westminster School and for a short period worked as a bricklayer for his stepfather. Jonson was briefly in the military, where he killed an enemy in single combat. In his next career, as an actor, Jonson also wrote dialogue in some of the works in which he acted. After killing another actor in a duel, Jonson was arrested but released after claiming benefit of clergy, which meant that he was an educated man. Jonson converted to Roman Catholicism during this period, and although he escaped hanging, he was still labeled a felon after his release. Jonson's first play, *Every Man in His Humour,* was written this same year, 1598, with William Shakespeare playing one of the roles on stage. Jonson continued with a new play every year for the next few years: *Every Man out of His Humou*r (1599), *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), and *Poetaster* (1601). Perhaps best known for his court masques, Jonson wrote the first of many, *The Masque of Blackness*, in 1605.

Although Jonson became well established as a playwright with works such as *Volpone* (1606), *Epicene, or the Silent Woman* (1610), *The Alchemist* (1610), *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), and *The Devil was an Ass* (1616), he is also well known as a poet. Jonson was not formally appointed England's poet laureate, but he was awarded a pension in 1616 by King James I, thus acknowledging that Jonson was essentially performing that function. That same year, Jonson became the first poet or dramatist to publish a folio edition of his *Works.* Since not even Shakespeare had published a compilation of his work, Jonson received some criticism for this action. However, he was awarded with an honorary M.A. from Cambridge University in 1616. Among Jonson's patrons was the Sidney family, for whom he wrote one of his most famous poems, *To Penshurst,* one of the best known poems to celebrate an estate and family. The beauty of this poem and the skill with which Jonson composed it is evident to visitors who abandon the road to approach Penshurst from the back of the estate.

Jonson was not always popular with audiences, who while attending his plays were often critical of the writer. During the height of his creativity, Jonson was as popular a writer as Shakespeare, who was also Jonson's friend. But he saw much of his popularity diminish later in his life while Shakespeare's continued to grow. Although Jonson was largely responsible for the publication of the first folio of Shakespeare's work in 1623, for which he wrote a poem, he was less generous with his praise in private. Still, there is no doubt that Jonson both liked and admired Shakespeare. While Jonson was a talented writer, his misfortune was to be writing plays during the same period as a talent as enormous as Shakespeare. Jonson spent the last nine years of his life bedridden after suffering a stroke. He died in 1637 and was buried in Westminster Abbey

Plot Summary

Act I

When the play opens, Volpone and Mosca are discussing the great wealth that Volpone has amassed and that he enjoys seeing and touching. Volpone has no family and no heirs, and he enjoys the game of acquiring riches far more then he does the actual wealth he amasses. Volpone is in excellent health, but when his first visitor is announced, the lawyer Voltore, Volpone quickly feigns grave illness for his visitor, who has brought Volpone an expensive gift. Mosca suggests that Volpone is due to die at any moment and that if Voltore visits often, each time with an expensive gift, Voltore will inherit all Volpone's wealth. After Voltore departs, Volpone and Mosca repeat their performance for the next visitor, the miser Corbaccio. After Corbaccio leaves, Corvino enters, and the routine is repeated, with Corvino convinced that he will inherit, just as the two previous visitors were also convinced. Volpone celebrates his new gifts and the successful deceit of his visitors.

Act II

Peregrine and Sir Politic Would-be are attempting to impress each other with their relative importance in the world. While this conversation is going on, Volpone enters disguised as a Mountebank (a quack doctor). He sets up a stand and begins to promote his medicines. After listening to a disguised Volpone promote his medicines and cures, the two Englishmen begin arguing with Volpone over prices. Attracted by the commotion, Celia leans out her window and is noticed by Volpone, who is immediately smitten. Volpone decides he must have this woman and instructs Mosca to make it possible. When Corvino emerges and sees his wife at the window, he begins to beat on Volpone and chastises his wife to remain cloistered inside.

Mosca goes to Corvino and tells him that Volpone is very ill, and that the doctors have said he might be better if only he has a beautiful young woman to sleep beside him. Corvino suggests that Mosca hire a prostitute, but Mosca warns that such women are dishonest and might attempt through trickery to take Volpone's wealth. After Corvino is convinced that Volpone is too ill to make use of a woman, and that his wife would be safe, Corvino offers his own wife to sleep by Volpone. This act ends with Corvino telling Celia to get ready; they will be going to visit Volpone.

Act III

Mosca, who has been augmenting Volpone's plots with some of his own, meets Bonario on the street. He tells the young man that his father, Corbaccio, is going to disinherit his son in favor of Volpone. To prove his accusation to the disbelieving Bonario, Mosca invites him to Volpone's house to overhear Corbaccio's meeting with Volpone. While waiting for Mosca to return, Volpone's three freaks entertain him until a guest arrives.

Lady Politic Would-be enters, but her constant chatter about meaningless things almost overwhelms Volpone, who begins to think that her chatter might actually kill him. At this moment Mosca returns. To rid Volpone of this annoying woman, Mosca tells her that he saw her husband with one of the most beautiful courtesans of Venice.

Mosca, who has brought Bonario to witness his father's meeting with Volpone, now hides the young man in Volpone's gallery, as Corvino arrives with Celia. Celia is taken into Volpone's presence, who is feigning grave illness at her approach. As Mosca takes Corvino away, Volpone jumps up and attempts to attack Celia. Bonario comes to her rescue and the two young people exit the room. Volpone recognizes that he is in danger and his plots may soon be revealed if he is turned over to the police. Mosca takes advantage of Corbaccio's sudden appearance to tell him that his son reacted violently to his accidental discovery that he was to be disinherited. In response, Corbaccio does, indeed, disinherit his son. Voltore, who has also arrived and who has heard much of the plotting, is convinced by Mosca that he has misunderstood. Voltore is told that Bonario has convinced Celia to lie about Volpone so that Corbaccio will not change his will. Voltore agrees to help Volpone and the three go to the senate to seek legal action against Bonario.

Act IV

Sir Politic Would-be is telling Peregrine about his plots and secret plans for several inventions and ways to get rich. When Lady Politic Would-be enters, she thinks that Peregrine is a woman in disguise, but apologizes when she realizes that Peregrine is, indeed, a man. The result of the Lady' s actions is that Peregrine becomes convinced that Sir Politic Would-be is a man without honor. At that moment, Mosca enters and tells the Lady that the courtesan, who was earlier with her husband, has been arrested. Meanwhile, at the senate, the conflicting stories confuse the magistrates, but Voltore provides a masterful defense of Volpone and an attack on Celia and Bonario. The magistrates are convinced of Celia's lewdness after Lady Politic Would-be testifies that she saw the lady with Sir Politic Would-be; at the same time, Bonario is portrayed as Celia' s lover. While all this is going on around him, Volpone lies on a stretcher and points out that he is too ill to have performed the attack of which he is accused. The magistrates are convinced, and Volpone emerges victorious.

ActV

Volpone's success makes him even more confident of his superior intellect, and he hatches a new plan. His servants are dispatched to announce that Volpone has died and a new will leaves everything to Mosca. Mosca is dressed in Volpone's dressing gown and is told to count his riches as Voltore, Corvino, Corbaccio, and Lady Politic Would-be enter. Volpone hides and listens, but none of these disenfranchised heirs dares to speak out. While the deception with Volpone continues, Peregrine disguises himself and seeks revenge on Sir Politic Would-be, who has no idea why any of these events are occurring. The action then moves back to Volpone, who is enjoying his

deception so much that he instructs Mosca to go out into the streets and gloat at his victory. However, Volpone has underestimated his victims, and overstated his reliance upon Mosca, who has plans to seize the wealth and leave. When Voltore recants his testimony at Volpone's trial, the magistrates send for Mosca. The entire plot is revealed, and Volpone admits his role when Mosca's own plans are foiled. As a man of lower ranking, Mosca is first whipped and then sent to the galleys as a prisoner. Volpone is sent to prison and his goods seized and donated to a hospital. Voltore is disbarred and banished, while Corbaccio must retire to a monastery and turn his estate over to his son. Corvino faces public humiliation and must return his wife to her father, with her dowry tripled in value.

Dedication, Argument, Prologue

Dedication, Argument, Prologue Summary

The play is dedicated to both the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. In the dedication, Jonson describes how he wants to produce a play that has both a meaning and is enjoyable. The argument uses an acrostic, a poem in which the first letter in each line, when read in sequence, forms a name, in the form of Volpone's name, to lay out the plot. Essentially, the play has no secrets, because the entire plot is summarized in the first seven lines of the play. In the prologue, the audience is introduced to the play, and Jonson hopes the play will be a success. Jonson boasts that he wrote the play in only five weeks and all the humor is of his own design. Jonson also promises the audience will laugh so hard their cheeks will turn red.

Dedication, Argument, Prologue Analysis

Although these first three parts of the play may seem superfluous, they are necessary to introduce both the themes and, more importantly, the tone of the play. The dedication outlines Jonson's intent for the play, so the reader can have no other option but to read the play as a didactic tale with a moral meaning. The argument sums up the play, showing that the basic plot is not what is important about the play, but rather the viewer should focus on the deceit and avarice played out in the plot and note how things turn out for the perpetrators.

Although the prologue seems boastful and arrogant, it serves to show that the play is not only a moral tale, but also has entertainment value. The prologue sets the tone for the rest of the play. It is boisterous and entertaining, as much as the following acts are.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The play opens on a room in Volpone's house in Venice in 1606. It is early morning, and Volpone, a Venetian gentleman whose name means fox, is accompanied by Mosca, his parasite or assistant. Mosca pulls away the curtain to the room where Volpone keeps his vast fortune.

Volpone admires his wealth, calling it a relic and a sacred treasure. Mosca, whose name means fly, and Volpone discuss how riches are better than wisdom, making Volpone extraordinarily fortunate. The reader then learns Volpone did not come upon his fortune honestly, but rather, he is a con man.

Mosca describes how well Volpone spends his fortune. Volpone tells Mosca it is better to spend your fortune and enjoy it than see it rot. At this, the two discuss Volpone's latest con. Volpone has no spouse and no heirs, but there are many people who would like to be named Volpone's heir, so Volpone is pretending to be ill in an attempt to con three nobleman of Venice. Volpone enjoys the gifts they bring him in the hopes of winning his estate, but he only is using the con to gain more wealth. Volpone offers them no hope of reciprocation, because, in truth, he has no intention of naming any of them his heir.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The first scene of the play establishes the scene and the protagonist of the play. Volpone is portrayed as a rich man who is a con artist. Volpone's latest con will be the plot of the play. Mosca's description of his use of riches establishes Volpone as a hedonist who is self centered. This is important, because Volpone ruins the lives of several people in the play, without a care except to pursue his own pleasure.

Volpone's description of his wealth in religious terms is almost sacrilegious. Volpone thinks gold is more valuable than entrance into heaven. In essence, he is replacing God with money. Although in today's world this is not anything unusual, the premise would have been shocking to an Elizabethan audience.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Nano, a dwarf, Castrone, a eunuch, and Androgyno, an hermaphrodite all enter the scene to entertain Volpone. Nano tells a fable, tracing Androgyno's soul back to Pythagoras. Volpone then begins to sing a song in praise of fools, court jesters. There is a knock at the door, and Mosca says Signor Voltore, a lawyer, has arrived.

Volpone sends him to fetch his sick clothes and to let in Voltore. When Mosca returns, he informs Volpone that Voltore has brought him an engraved gold plate as a gift. Volpone rushes to put on his sick clothes and recants a litany of illness he has pretended to have for the past three years.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno introduce a grotesque element into the play. They establish themselves as important in several ways. First they represent Volpone. They highlight his lack of desire to produce children as something unnatural, while at the same time, demoting him in the eyes of the viewer to something less than human. They speak in rhyming couplets, while the rest of the characters speak in iambic pentameter. This establishes them as less sophisticated. They are also Volpone's family, in a sense, because he has no wife or children, so it is important to note that Volpone's family is of a base quality.

Volpone assumes a disguise to fool Voltore. Disguises are an important devise in the play. They serve to show the characters true self. In this case, Volpone's disguise of illness shows how corrupt and diseased his true character really is. This will continue to be revealed as the play progresses.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

Voltore is shown into the sick room. Volpone puts on an act that he is very ill and appreciative of Voltore's visit. Volpone thanks him for his gift, a large piece of gold plate. Volpone tells Voltore he fears he will not last long. As Mosca shows Voltore out, he tells him that he is certain he is Volpone's heir. Mosca leads Voltore to believe he is Volpone's favorite, because Volpone admires lawyers for their cunning. Mosca begs Voltore to show him mercy and to take him in when Volpone finally dies. When they hear a knock at the door, Mosca hurries Voltore out of the door. Volpone is quick to praise Mosca for his convincing job deceiving Voltore, but Mosca stills him to let in Corbaccio, an elderly gentleman.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

This scene begins to establish the theme of greed's destruction, which will be carried out throughout the play. This and the following two scenes serve to introduce the greedy legacy hunters. Legacy hunting was thought to be a good investment in Elizabethan times; however, in Volpone's case, he is not ill, so the investment only serves to increase Volpone's wealth.

Mosca is firmly established as helping keep the deceit in motion. Volpone plays sick, but Mosca designs to keep the legacy hunters interested and convinced that they will be heirs. Mosca's praise of Voltore is really an insult. In the ironic praise, Mosca tells Voltore that Volpone admires lawyers' ability to deceive and lie -- essentially negative things.

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

Mosca hurriedly puts the plate away, and the two prepare to see who the bigger "fool" will be. Mosca shows Corbaccio in and when he sees Volpone "sleeping," he inquires after his health. Mosca tells him that Volpone's health is worse, and Corbaccio is pleased to hear the news.

Corbaccio continues to repeatedly ask Mosca questions or repeats the answer incorrectly, leaving the reader to assume that he has hearing problems. Corbaccio shows Mosca a vial of medicine he brought as a gift. Volpone does not trust medicine, and Corbaccio quickly changes his opinion of doctors to be more in line with Volpone's ideas.

Once Mosca reveals what Voltore brought as a gift, Corbaccio quickly produces a bag of coins. Mosca lets him know that Volpone will be very pleased with the gift. Mosca then launches into the next phase of the con. Mosca works to convince Corbaccio that the quickest way to ensure he will be Volpone's heir is to disinherit his son and name Volpone as his heir. This will force Volpone to reciprocate the favor. Since Corbaccio will surely outlive Volpone, there is no risk in it. Mosca then proceeds to make fun of Corbaccio because he can't hear. Corbaccio imagines he might have his youth restored to him, while Mosca rushes him out the door.

Volpone praises Mosca for being so clever and deceptive. Volpone then makes fun of Corbaccio, who is old and will die before Volpone, for fantasizing about having his youth restored. They then hear the knock of Corvino, the merchant.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

Corbaccio is the character with the most to lose in his plot to become Volpone's heir, but he is also the most dastardly of the three suitors. Corbaccio brings a vial of medicine that is most likely poison, and he suggests Mosca do away with Volpone. Corbaccio also seems joyous at hearing the news that Volpone's health is declining. Although the other characters will be glad to see Volpone dead, they do not rejoice in his illness in front of him.

Corbaccio's attempt to become Volpone's heir is not only amusing, it is also ironic. Corbaccio is near death, yet he is still attempting to gain wealth. Corbaccio is at the height of greed. Corbaccio only desires to become Volpone's heir to obtain money for money's sake, while Volpone desires to get money for pleasure. It is left to the viewer/reader to decide which motive is worse.

Act 1, Scene 5

Act 1, Scene 5 Summary

Corvino enters the room and sees Volpone looking dead. Mosca tells him that although Volpone is not dead, he might as well be. Corvino has brought Volpone a lustrous pearl and a diamond. Mosca leads Corvino to believe that Volpone cannot hear. Corvino presses the diamond and pearl into Volpone's hand in the hopes of pleasing him. Mosca proceeds to assure Corvino that he is the heir.

Corvino inquires if Volpone has any children. Mosca informs him that Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno are his children and that he has a dozen bastard children, but that he is not affected by any of them and has left them nothing. Corvino and Mosca, at Mosca's encouragement, discuss how disgusting Volpone has become as his illness has taken hold of him. Mosca asks Corvino to suffocate Volpone, but Corvino refuses to use violence.

After Corvino leaves, Volpone admires his day's booty and thanks Mosca for his help in securing it. He tells Mosca to call the entertainers and prepare a feast to celebrate. While he is basking in his treasure, Lady Politic Would-Be comes to call, but Volpone sends her away and tells her to return in three hours.

Mosca and Volpone begin discussing how odd the English are. Lady Would-Be is beautiful but not as beautiful as Corvino's wife Celia. Volpone asks why, if Celia is so beautiful, he has never heard of her. Mosca pleads ignorance, saying he only found out yesterday, and Corvino keeps her under guard and strict lock and key. The only way Celia gets any air is to sit by the window. Volpone is set on seeing her and decides he will wear a disguise to gain her audience.

Act 1, Scene 5 Analysis

The final scene in Act 1 is filled with foreshadowing. Volpone foreshadows his eventual downfall in the last line of the scene. Mosca's eventual betrayal of Volpone is foreshadowed by his suggestion that Corvino suffocate Volpone. Corvino, even though he does not take the suggestion, is thereby associated with violence. Corvino will later act violently toward his wife.

This scene also introduces Volpone's love interest in the play, Celia. Celia, in essence, leads to his eventual downfall.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Sir Politic Would-Be and Peregrine, an English Traveler who just arrived in Venice, are sitting in front of Corvino's house discussing their travels. Peregrine left England seven weeks ago, and Sir Politic is attempting to educate him on how to survive in a strange city and how to be an expert traveler.

Sir Politic relates a piece of outrageous news to Peregrine, who immediately assumes Sir Politic is gullible and that he will believe anything and feign knowledge about everything. Sir Politic relates that the only reason he is in Venice is because his wife wanted to come, and then he asks Peregrine for word from England.

Peregrine takes advantage of Sir Politic's gullibility and tells him outrageous stories that Sir Politic immediately believes. Peregrine then tells him how fortunate he was to run into Sir Politic, who can help him navigate the city.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The scene introduces the Sir Politic/Peregrine subplot. The subplot takes the main theme of the novel and treats it slightly differently. In this case, the subplot serves to make the theme of gullibility more pronounced in the major theme. In Sir Politic, Jonson epitomizes vanity. This section reflects the main theme of greed, but also focuses on another moral flaw. Sir Politic is so vain he is unwilling to admit when he has no knowledge of a subject.

The two also represent a current Elizabethan obsession with Italy. However, the pervading attitude was that Italy would corrupt the moral good of the English visitor. Sir Politic serves as an example of a corrupted visitor; while Peregrine, who is simply passing through, is an example of an uncorrupted visitor.

Act 2, Scenes 2 and 3

Act 2, Scenes 2 and 3 Summary

Mosca and Nano arrive on the scene in disguise. They are serving as scouts for Volpone. Sir Politic identifies the arriving group as a group following a mountebank, a medicine show man. Sir Politic describes mountebanks as wise men. Peregrine disagrees and says he heard they were quacks.

Volpone is then introduced as a famous mountebank, Scoto of Manuta. Volpone begins hocking his ointment and offers it at a high price. Volpone says it will cure all types of ailments, and then offers a prize to the first person who throws him a handkerchief. Celia, who has been watching from her window, throws hers down, and Volpone offers her a powder that preserves youth.

Corvino happens upon the exchange in Scene 3 and is furious to see Volpone peddling at his window. Corvino beats Volpone and the group away. When Sir Politic sees the violence erupting, he takes his leave, and Peregrine follows, telling Sir Politic to be careful because this might be some type of plot against him. When Sir Politic agrees, Peregrine decides to stick with him for the day in an attempt to amuse himself.

Act 2, Scenes 2 and 3 Analysis

Again, disguises are central in these scenes. Volpone assumes yet another disguise. He has told Mosca he wants this disguise to maintain some of his character, so it is fitting that he chose a mountebank -- someone whose profession it is to deceive. Volpone's assumption of disguises adds to the humor and plot of the play. While they reveal some essence of his character, his enjoyment at assuming characters and his inability to maintain a character make him unstable and untrustworthy.

Act 2, Scenes 4 and 5

Act 2, Scenes 4 and 5 Summary

Volpone cries out that he is wounded. The viewer assumes that he is wounded from Corvino's beating, but then he announces he is wounded in love. Volpone and Mosca lament that he was ever told about Celia, and Mosca promises to do whatever he can to ensure that Volpone has Celia. Volpone, overcome with lust, tells Mosca to take whatever money and treasure he needs, as long as he gets him the girl. Volpone begins to discard his disguise and sends Mosca to get the girl, while he revels in the success of his disguise.

In the next scene, we see Corvino dragging Celia by her hair. Corvino is berating her for her dialogue with the mountebank -- something he sees as an act of betrayal. Celia begs for his patience, explaining that she would never be unfaithful and that she never goes out except to church, so there is no reason for him to be jealous. Corvino then restricts her from going to church, plans to brick up her window and, oddly enough, tells her she must do everything backward. Just when he concludes his list of punishments Mosca arrives.

Act 2, Scenes 4 and 5 Analysis

Volpone's and Corvino's reactions to Celia are important in establishing her as Volpone's downfall. Volpone once thought of his gold above everything else, but now he is willing to throw it all away on his conquest for Celia. Celia becomes the greatest prize. Volpone's obsession with her serves to highlight his hedonism, but it also serves to show how the grotesque can transform even a good feeling into something unhealthy. Volpone describes his love for her in terms of illness (fever, melting livers, etc). Volpone's obsession with her has turned into an almost sexual perversion and has quickly turned from a healthy lust into an unnatural desire.

Corvino, on the other hand, seems to have a sexual psychosis about Celia. Corvino imagines her having intercourse with the mountebank and becomes violent toward her, because of her imagined infidelity. Thus, to Corvino, sex and violence are linked. More than that, Celia is his property, and he, the merchant, feels cheated on a deal. Corvino's idea of Celia as property becomes even more important in the next scene. This scene serves to establish that Celia belongs to him, and he can use her how he sees fit.

Act 2, Scenes 6 and 7

Act 2, Scenes 6 and 7 Summary

Mosca comes to tell Corvino of Volpone's recovery from Scoto's salve. Mosca says the two other legacy hunters brought the salve to Volpone and have even gone so far as to hire doctors to look into saving Volpone's life. Mosca implores Corvino not to let the others win Volpone's favor and become the heirs. Mosca tells him the doctors have concurred that the only way to save Volpone is with the help of a young, lusty woman.

Corvino suggests hiring a prostitute, but Mosca says a prostitute is too experienced, besides, he says, the doctor has offered his virginal daughter. When Corvino hears of the doctor's offer, he decides he cannot be undone and sends Mosca to tell Volpone he has offered his wife to help him.

In Scene 7, Corvino calls to Celia and tells her that, before, he was only joking. Corvino tells her he is not jealous and to prove it, she should get ready, because they are going to a feast.

Act 2, Scenes 6 and 7 Analysis

Mosca's request pits Corvino's greatest obsessions, money and his wife, against each other. It is a moment when Corvino must decide what is more important, money or his wife's honor. Corvino's change of opinion from wanting to keep Celia hidden away, to offering her up to Volpone for a fortune, is ironic.

Act 3, Scenes 1 and 2

Act 3, Scenes 1 and 2 Summary

Scene 1 of Act 3 is a soliloquy by Mosca. Mosca is so proud of himself for all the convincing he has done, and he plainly sees himself as better than the other servants. Mosca is growing aware of his power and independence from Volpone.

In Scene 2, Mosca runs into Bonario, Corbaccio's son. Bonario dismisses Mosca, telling him he wants nothing to do with him. Mosca thinks Bonario is rude because Mosca is poor, but Bonario tells him it is because he thinks Mosca is lazy and ingratiates himself to others too easily. Mosca begins to cry and pretends he is insulted. Bonario changes his opinion after seeing how sensitive Mosca is.

Mosca reveals that Bonario's father intends to disinherit him. Bonario cannot believe his claim, and Mosca offers to take him to Volpone's house where he can see it with his own eyes. Bonario accepts, because he does not trust Mosca.

Act 3, Scenes 1 and 2 Analysis

This is the first time Mosca is seen alone. The soliloquy is a tool used to allow a character to speak directly to the audience. This enhances their character. Mosca is revealing that he is becoming more independent and powerful. While the power scares him, he is beginning to like it. This foreshadows his eventual defiance of Volpone.

Mosca's meeting with Bonario is used as another agent in Volpone's downfall; however, Mosca intends to use it for Corbaccio's demise.

Act 3, Scenes 3, 4, 5 and 6

Act 3, Scenes 3, 4, 5 and 6 Summary

Volpone impatiently waits for Mosca. Volpone calls Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno to entertain him. Nano recites a little verse about why he is the best fool. Just then, there is a knock, and Volpone hopes it is Mosca with Celia, but it is only Lady Would-Be. Volpone hates that she is there but has her shown in anyway.

Lady Would-Be calls for her lady's maids, because she feels she needs to look perfect as a representative of England. Lady Would-Be is consumed by vanity. Lady Would-Be goes to sit with Volpone, and everything he says to try to get rid of her only encourages her to talk all the more. Lady Would-Be finally starts talking about a lover of whom Volpone reminds her. Lady Would-Be says she will only talk to him until he falls asleep, and he prays for someone to rescue him.

As though on cue, Mosca enters, and Volpone begs him to save him from Lady Would-Be. Mosca tells her he just saw Sir Politic rowing with a lovely lady. Lady Would-Be borrows the dwarf and leaves. Mosca tells Volpone that Corbaccio is on his way with the will and, once he leaves, Mosca will tell him the rest of his secret. Mosca's news has revived Volpone's spirits.

Mosca then finds Bonario a hiding place to listen to the exchange between his father and Volpone.

Act 3, Scenes 3, 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

Lady Would-Be is the female counterpart of her husband and she both exacerbates his vanity and his need to be knowledgeable. The chapter is also sexist. The characters imply that Lady Would-Be should be quiet, but none of the other characters are told to be quiet when they blather on. In the same vein, Volpone's desire to sleep with Celia is not condemned, but the thought continues a negative stereo-type about women. Celia also represents what can happen to women who are not properly prepared against the corruptions of Italy.

Act 3, Scene 7

Act 3, Scene 7 Summary

Corvino has come to Volpone's too early. At Corvino's arrival, Mosca goes to tell Bonario that his father has been delayed, and he can go to the gallery to wait in the meantime, but because Bonario does not trust Mosca, he decides to stay put.

Celia becomes aware of what Corvino intends, and she begs him not to endanger her chastity. Celia offers to do whatever he asks if he will not make her sleep with Volpone. Corvino is outraged she is trying to defy him. Corvine threatens her with all sorts of odd punishments, including killing a slave and tying his dead body to her. Mosca and Corvino finally leave her alone in the room, hoping that once they leave, she will relent.

While Celia laments her husband prostituting her, Volpone jumps off the couch and announces his presence. Celia is surprised to see him so revived, and he credits her beauty for his change in health. Volpone reveals that he was the mountebank, and he admits that he has been faking his illness. Volpone offers himself up as a lover to her, and he suggests that she take his offer, because it will offer her a chance to escape her husbands iron rule.

Celia pleads with him to have a conscience and not to take advantage of her. Volpone, again, tells her of his love and builds the case that their love can be great. Celia begs him to scar her or give her leprosy -- anything to take away her beauty and allow her to escape his fancy.

Volpone accuses her of thinking he must be impotent. Volpone tells her that she must either submit or he will force her. Just when Volpone threatens to rape her, Bonario jumps out of his hiding place. Bonario tells Volpone to free Celia or suffer death. Then, Bonario takes Celia and leaves. Volpone becomes frenzied, because he realizes he has been discovered.

Act 3, Scene 7 Analysis

This scene represents a turning point in the plot from fun to serious. Volpone has, up until this point, been a harmless con artist, participating in pranks that do not harm innocents. Volpone has always been upfront that his con only serves to meet his pleasures, but in this scene, he reveals he cares not what lengths he goes to in order to get pleasure.

Volpone threatens to harm both Bonario and Celia in different ways in this scene. Volpone uses allusion to classical works in order to establish that Celia and he could be great lovers. At the same time, he builds his love up for Celia to represent heaven, but in his tale all things are fleeting. The impermanence of his version of heaven shows that

his fancy quickly changes and he doesn't maintain interest for too long on any one subject.

Bonario and Celia are established through their virtue and honor in this chapter to be the voice of morality for the play. All the other characters lack a moral fortitude, but Celia and Bonario maintain their disposition at all costs.

Act 3, Scenes 8 and 9

Act 3, Scenes 8 and 9 Summary

Mosca comes to Volpone, wounded in the face. Mosca and Volpone brainstorm on what to do now that Volpone has been discovered. Mosca suggests suicide, but before he gets much further, there is a knock at the door. The two assume it is the law, and Mosca escorts Volpone back to his couch.

Corbaccio enters and asks Mosca how he was injured. Mosca confesses that it was Bonario who injured him. Mosca tells him that Bonario found out about Corbaccio's plot to disinherit his son and came to Volpone's house to kill him in a plot. With this news, Corbaccio's decision to disinherit his son is sealed.

Voltore comes to the house, and Corbaccio cannot hear the conversation, because he is deaf. Voltore accuses Mosca of playing them both, but Mosca allays his fears by telling him he was only trying to build Volpone's fortune so that Voltore might inherit it all. Mosca tells Voltore of Celia's visit and weaves a tale that Bonario threatened to kill Celia if she did not say Volpone tried to rape her. With this news, Corbaccio and Voltore fetch Corvino and go to the courts.

Act 3, Scenes 8 and 9

Act 3, Scenes 8 and 9 Summary

The role of Volpone completely shifts in this chapter. When Volpone looses it with Celia he crosses a line that he seems to have established early in the play -- to only deceive those who deceive themselves.

A face is what a character presents to the world. Mosca's wounded face seems to indicate that his face has been found to be deceptive. Mosca, again, saves the day when he begins to plot with Corbaccio and Voltore against Bonario and Celia. Volpone will seem to return to favor in Act 4.

Act 4, Scenes 1, 2, and 3

Act 4, Scenes 1, 2, and 3 Summary

The beginning of Act 4, once again, brings Sir Politic and Peregrine into the picture. Sir Politic is educating Peregrine on how to be a proper gentleman traveler in Venice. Sir Politic then reveals he has a plot in mind and swears Peregrine to secrecy. Sir Politic wishes he had someone he could trust to tell his plans to, and then proceeds to reveal his plans to Peregrine. Sir Politic's ideas include supplying the state of Italy with discount herring, banning tinderboxes, and a test for the plague involving onions.

Lady Would-Be and Nano are still searching for Sir Politic when Lady Would-Be spies him from a distance and takes Peregrine to be a woman in man's clothing. Lady Would-Be then attacks Sir Politic for tarnishing his reputation. Sir Politic says he is confused and does not understand and leaves her. Lady Would-Be begins to admonish Peregrine who also does not understand.

Mosca arrives on the scene and asks what is happening. When Lady Would-Be reveals that she thinks Peregrine is a woman, Mosca corrects her and tells her that the lady she is after is at the Senate. Lady Would-Be apologizes to Peregrine and asks him to come visit her.

Act 4, Scenes 1, 2, and 3 Analysis

The didactic nature of the play takes a back seat to plot needs in these and the following scenes. We learn more about Sir Politic, and Jonson sets this subplot up for a conclusion. Lady Would-Be mistakes Peregrine for a woman, and then makes advances at him as soon as she discovers he is a man. This gives Peregrine a reason to be angry toward Sir Politic.

Mosca is setting Lady Would-Be up to identify Celia in court. With this, he becomes the main character in Act 4 and sets up all the plot devices from this point forward.

Act 4, Scenes 4, 5, and 6

Act 4, Scenes 4, 5, and 6 Summary

This scene is set at the Scrutenio, or Senate House. Mosca, Corvino, Corbaccio, and Voltore enter and are planning how to get out of their predicament. Corvino is worried Voltore will become co-heir, because of Voltore's service to Volpone and he is presenting the case in court. Mosca assures him it is not true. Corvino also worries his reputation will be damaged, because of his decision to prostitute his wife. Mosca tells him not to worry, because he is producing witnesses against Celia.

The court officials ask for Volpone, but Mosca protests, saying he is too ill. The officials insist and they send for Volpone. Voltore asks if he, as Volpone's lawyer, might speak in his absence. Voltore then explains that Celia and Bonario are known lovers, and when Corbaccio found out his son was having an affair with a married woman, he decided to disinherit him. Upon hearing his father's intentions, Bonario decided to go to Volpone and kill his father. However, when he arrives at Volpone's and his father is not present, he decides to drag Volpone, naked, from his bed. When Mosca comes to his defense, Bonario stabs him in the face.

Voltore then calls Corbaccio as a witness, who says his son is a knave. Corvino speaks next and calls his wife a whore, and says he has suffered through enough shame. Finally, Mosca shows his wound to the advocates, the court officials. Voltore then testifies that Celia baited Sir Politic and offers to produce a witness.

Lady Would-Be is brought into the court, and she immediately calls Celia an adulterer and worse, and she quickly apologizes to the court for her outburst, citing her passion as the cause. When the court asks Celia and Bonario for witnesses, they have none, save their consciences.

Volpone is brought in, looking very ill, and Voltore asks if a man in his condition could possibly commit rape. Bonario says he wants Volpone's illness proven, to which Voltore responds that they can inflict any torture on Volpone, but his constitution will not change.

The court convicts Celia and Bonario. Mosca congratulates the other men on their wonderful act and offers to escort Lady Would-Be home, but she insists on going to visit Volpone. It is only after Mosca tells her that Volpone is in the process of naming her in his will that she relents and returns to her home.

Act 4, Scenes 4, 5, and 6 Analysis

These scenes are marked by Volpone's near absence from them. Mosca has filled the role of protagonist, and he truly becomes independent in this scene, since he becomes the driving force in the plot.

Lady Would-Be's presence in the court room somewhat loosely ties the plot and the subplot together. Lady Would-Be shows her true ignorance and greed in the court room when she falsely accuses Celia. Lady Would-Be comes under Mosca's spell and relents to his request to testify.

Voltore and Mosca's victory at the Senate seem to indicate that evil has triumphed over good, but Mosca's independence foreshadows something more to come in his relationship with Volpone. We know that evil cannot win, because Jonson has told the viewers in the argument that all will get theirs in the end.

Volpone seems to have given up his place as a likeable villain who maintains some of the audience's sympathy when he attempted to rape Celia. Volpone's absence from this scene symbolizes his absence from the audience's sympathy. The victory in the courtroom is the start of what will seem like Volpone regaining control of his life.

Act 5, Scenes 1, 2, and 3

Act 5, Scenes 1, 2, and 3 Summary

Volpone returns home and announces that he is tired of his act. Although, he did not dislike his disguise, he feels pretending to be ill in public has made some of his symptoms come true. Volpone decides to drink and calls for Mosca.

Mosca and Volpone take relief in knowing they made it out of the court situation unscathed. Mosca tells Volpone that Voltore did a marvelous job defending him. Volpone decides to end his con and tells Nano and Castrone to go about town and say he has died. Volpone writes a will that names Mosca as his heir. Volpone assumes the three legacy hunters will immediately be drawn to his house. There is a knock on the door, and Volpone hides.

Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, and Lady Would-Be walk into the room to find Mosca taking inventory and entreat him to show them the will. Mosca nonchalantly hands them the will, and they are shocked and outraged to find Mosca has been named the heir. They begin asking him questions, and he tells them he is too busy to be bothered right now. While they ask questions, one by one, Mosca responds to each that he did not know what they expected, because Corvino prostituted his wife, Corbaccio betrayed his son, Voltore is educated and has other means to earn a fortune, and he asks Lady Would-Be what she would have done to get the fortune. When they leave, Volpone embraces him, and they decide to dress in disguises and to go look for the four to torture them further.

Act 5, Scenes 1, 2, and 3 Analysis

Once Volpone imprisons Celia and Bonario, he ceases to follow the plot set out at the beginning of the play -- deceit punishing deceit. Jonson cannot let Volpone's act go unpunished. In the last act, Volpone's disguise becomes truth when the town believes he has died.

Mosca maintains his position as the central character and his admonishment of the legacy hunters points out that, through their greed, they have lost their fortunes, dignity, and the respect of the community.

Volpone clearly wants to end his lie, but the lies he has told are so widespread that they cannot just cease. This leads the viewer to assume something horrible has to happen to Volpone in order to end the lie.

Act 5, Scene 4

Act 5, Scene 4 Summary

Peregrine goes to Sir Politic's, disguised, and tells him the young man he met earlier, Peregrine, told the court that Sir Politic has a plot to sell Venice to the Turks. Sir Politic becomes paranoid. When there is a knock at the door, he decides to hide in the carcass of a sea turtle, and he sends his maids to burn his papers. Peregrine and his friends find Sir Politic, and Peregrine says they are now even. Lady Would-Be announces she intends to go to the sea, and Sir Politic agrees that it would be best to leave his home in Venice behind.

Act 5, Scene 4

Act 5, Scene 4 Summary

This scene is a funny scene, intended to act as break in the seriousness for the viewer, but it also mimics exactly what will become of Volpone. Sir Politic disguises himself like as Volpone is disguised, he is discovered, like Volpone will be discovered, and Sir Politic experiences a reversal in fortune -- Sir Politic is about to become the butt of jokes he would normally tell and Volpone looses everything.

This scene is also the conclusion of the subplot. In the play's conclusion, Sir Politic looses foreshadowing that good will triumph over evil after all.

Act 5, Scenes 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9

Act 5, Scenes 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 Summary

Mosca and Volpone meet back up in their disguises. Volpone leaves to check on the courts. Mosca sends Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno to revel, because he is the heir. Mosca then begins setting the "fox trap" to overcome Volpone.

Volpone runs into Corbaccio and Corvino on the street, and he congratulates them on the wealth they just inherited, feigning that he thinks Volpone left him his estate. They quickly leave him. Then he sees Voltore and goes to torture him.

Volpone mocks Voltore, much in the same way he mocked Corbaccio and Corvino. When Voltore exits, Volpone hurries to meet Corbaccio and Corvino at the corner to continue the torture.

When Mosca passes, Corbaccio and Corvino are infuriated that a mere parasite has gained their wealth. Volpone comes upon the scene and says he cannot believe the story of the parasite is true. They are now very irritated with Volpone, who is disguised in a sergeant's uniform, and threaten to beat him. When Mosca returns, they leave, and Volpone hurries off to find Voltore.

Voltore verbally attacks Mosca who tells him to calm down. Volpone offers to throw dirt on Mosca and beat on him. Voltore tells Volpone, in disguise, to stop torturing him. Volpone says he knows Voltore cannot be comforted, but he was only trying to help.

Act 5, Scenes 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 Analysis

Although the issue of class is touched on throughout the entire play, these scenes embody the classist system that was almost a form of religion in Elizabethan England. Mosca has gone from parasite to nobleman and Volpone from nobleman to commodore. The social order has been turned upside down. Voltore's reaction to Mosca's climbing the social ladder is what one would expect. Social order was highly valued in the time the play was written and a destabilization to the social order caused rippling affects. Jonson's treatment of the class system does not reveal if he agrees with it or is criticizing it.

Volpone has decided to continue his game, in hope of getting more pleasure from continuing to torture the others. If he would have just left well enough alone, he may have escaped his eventual fate. Volpone's hedonistic desire for pleasure leads to his eventual demise.

Act 5, Scenes 10, 11, 12

Act 5, Scenes 10, 11, 12 Summary

Voltore arrives at the sentencing of Celia and Bonario and tells the court everything has been a huge mistake and that Mosca orchestrated it all. The court officials are surprised to hear of Volpone's death. Corvino and Corbaccio, in an attempt to save their own reputations, tell the court that Voltore and Mosca are liars. Volpone and a notary are sent to look for Mosca.

Volpone meets Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno on the street while he looks for Mosca. They tell Volpone that Mosca let them loose and took the keys. With this, Volpone begins to suspect Mosca has no intention of relinquishing his spot as heir.

The court is about to reverse its decision on Celia and Bonario when Volpone rushes in and says Mosca is on his way. He (he who?) tells Voltore that Volpone lives and he is still his chosen one. With the news, Voltore drops to the floor, and everyone pretends he is possessed by a demon to discount his recent tale.

When Mosca arrives at the court, he denies that Volpone lives, forcing Volpone to reveal himself. The court immediately frees Celia and Bonario. Mosca is sent to be whipped and imprisoned, Volpone is sent to the incurrabli, a house for those with incurable diseases, Voltore is debarred, Corvino has to send his wife back with a dowry and wear ass ears, and Corbaccio is sent to a sanatorium.

In the end, Volpone requests the audience to show their appreciation through applause.

Act 5, Scenes 10, 11, 12 Analysis

The punishments doled out to the offenders imitate their actual crime -- Corbaccio has his fortune stripped, Corvino who has been an 'ass' to his wife is transformed into an ass, Volpone who feigned illness will now be surrounded by illness, and Voltore is no longer allowed to be a lawyer.

Each character gets a fitting punishment, emphasizing the moral lesson of the play -- you reap what you sow. It is only in these final scenes that Jonson deviates from a traditional comedy. In a traditional comedy, the protagonist ends up happy. Here, no one but Celia and Bonario end up happy.

Again, Jonson touches on classism. While the judges think Mosca has money they treat him with respect, going so far as to call for a chair for him, but as soon as they find out he is poor, he is sent to jail for the rest of his life. Mosca's punishment is worse than all the other characters because he is not a nobleman.

The final scene seems almost out of place with the rest of the play, because Jonson obviously felt an overwhelming need to free Celia and Bonario. Because Volpone loses, there is a feeling of dissatisfaction with the ending of the play.

Characters

Androgyno

Androgyne is a hermaphrodite and a member of Volpone's household, whose sole purpose seems to be the entertainment and flattery of Volpone. Androgyno, Castrone, and Nano's appearance in Act I is devised by Mosca as a way to further ingratiate himself into Volpone's good favor. The trio reappear during the play, as Volpone needs additional distraction or entertainment.

Avocatori

Avocatori are the four judges, who hear the trial of Volpone. In the first trial, they are deceived by Voltore's accusations against Celia and Bonario and the witnesses who have been called to testify. After Voltore is disinherited, he goes to these magistrates and admits his crime. The four judges, who are confused, discover the truth after Volpone admits his plot. These four magistrates pass sentence on all the conspirators and find justice for Bonario and Celia.

Bonario

Bonario is Corbaccio's son. Mosca tells Bonario that his father is about to disinherit him and leave his estate to Volpone. And although he does not want to believe ill of his father, Mosca's tears convince Bonario of the servant's honesty, and Bonario agrees to listen to Volpone and Corbaccio's conversation. Bonario is an honest and good man, who saves Celia from Volpone's advances. However, because of Lady Politic Would-be's testimony, Bonario and Celia are accused and tried as schemers against Corvino. After the plots are discovered, Bonario is given his father's estate and his honor is returned.

Castrone

Castrone is a eunuch, one of the freaks that Volpone maintains in his household. With Androgyno and Nano, Castrone's role is simply to entertain Volpone when he is bored or needs distracting.

Celia

Celia is Corvino's wife. She is honest and pure, the opposite of almost every other character in the play. As Corvino's wife, she is subject to his misuse, even when her gives her to Volpone in hopes of being made heir. Celia is told that Volpone is in such poor health that she will be safe sleeping by his side, but she is still unwilling to obey

Corvino's wishes. When Volpone tries to attack her, Celia is saved by Bonario. Celia faces her trials with nobility, even when found guilty at the first trial. Celia illustrates the problems of women in this period. She is just some man's property, an object to be disposed of or sold.

Corbaccio

Corbaccio (also called The Raven) is an old miser who also wants Volpone's estate. Corbaccio is feeble, deaf, and greedy. Volpone convinces Corbaccio to disinherit his own son, Bonario, and to replace him with Volpone, who will then leave his estate to Bonario. Corbaccio is completely taken in by this plan and even plots to hasten Volpone's death through poison. Corbaccio is so corrupted by Mosca's plots and desire for Volpone's money, that he even testifies against his own son at the trial. In the final act, Corbaccio is punished, when the magistrates send him to a monastery and instruct him to turn his estate over to Bonario.

Corvino

Corvino (also called The Crow) is a rich merchant who seeks Volpone's estate. He is mean-spirited, cowardly, and jealous of his wife, Celia. But he is also greedy, and when he finds out that Volpone wants Celia, Corvino is willing to sacrifice his wife's virtue for money. Corvino leaves her in Volpone's hands as a ploy to get his inheritance, after Mosca tells Corvino that Volpone's doctors have said that a beautiful young woman should sleep by his side. To assure himself of Volpone's gratitude, Corvino volunteers his own wife, although he has been assured that Volpone is too feeble to take advantage of her. Corvino's punishment is the loss of his wife, who must be returned to her father with her dowry tripled.

The Crow

See Corvino

The Fox

See Volpone

The Gadfly

See Mosca

Lady Politic Would-be

Lady Politic Would-be is the wife of the English tourist. She affects strange airs and talks constantly. She is very shallow and not very intelligent. Her constant empty chatter is so offensive to Volpone that he would rather lose money than have to listen to her one more moment. She is unreasonably jealous and acts the fool when told her husband is having an affair with Celia. Lady Politic Would-be gives false testimony at the first trial, and thus, she helps save Volpone. She tries to hide her mental defects behind cosmetics and dress.

Mosca

Mosca (also called The Gadfly) is Volpone's flatterer, who plots against everyone else. He is malicious but also very witty. It is Mosca's job to convince each gift-giver that he or she will be the honored recipient of Volpone's will. Mosca carries out Volpone's plans, but he also conceives of pranks that take his master's plots just one step further. Mosca teases his master with descriptions of Celia, playing upon Volpone's desire for the woman, and ultimately leading to the collapse of the plots. Mosca is in love with himself, and like many men who are wrapped up in their own ego, Mosca underestimates his master. Whereas, Volpone loses with dignity, Mosca whines and curses as he is dragged away at the play's end. As a commoner, his punishment is more severe then Volpone's, and thus, Mosca pays a greater price for his greater plotting.

Nano

Nano is a dwarf, one of the freaks that Volpone keeps in his household for amusement, whose sole purpose seems to be the entertainment and flattery of Volpone. Nano, Castrone, and Androgyne's appearance in Act I is devised by Mosca as a way to further integrate himself into Volpone's good favor. The trio reappear later in the play when Volpone needs distracting.

Peregrine

Peregrine is a wise and sophisticated traveler, the very opposite of Sir Politic Would-be. When Lady Politic Would-be mistakes Peregrine for a courtesan, with whom she thinks her husband has been dallying, Peregrine thinks Sir Politic Would-be is without honor, and so devises of a plot to seek revenge and to diminish the English knight's ego and power.

The Raven

See Corbaccio

Sir Politic Would-be

Sir Politic Would-be is an English knight, who represents the English tourist traveling through Venice. He has many projects to advance, but he is also naive and gullible, seeing a spy around every corner. Sir Politic Would-be is eager to be thought an insider of politic doings. He also admires Volpone, does not understand that Volpone ridicules him, and in fact, wants to imitate Volpone. Since Volpone is never what he pretends, Sir Politic Would-be's imitation is an imitation of an imitation. Sir Politic Would-be is made a greater fool by Mosca, although it is unwittingly and unknown to the knight. As a result, Peregrine is also moved to make the knight the butt of his joke.

Volpone

Volpone (also known as The Fox) is an old "magnifico," who is more interested in the game of acquiring money than he is in the real property of money. He leaves no family to inherit his estate, and finds that pretending to leave his estate to his followers has created quite an interesting game. Thus, Volpone pretends to be ill in order to manipulate several men, who think they will become his heirs, and from whom he has acquired many expensive gifts. It can be argued that Volpone has some integrity, since he is not interested in tricking widows and children out of their money, although in truth, Volpone simply considers widows and children too gullible for his interests. Instead, he picks victims who present a challenge. Volpone enjoys the performances he devises and the disguises that he assumes. However, he has three weaknesses that make his plots susceptible to failure. The first weakness is Volpone's total trust in Mosca. The second weakness is Volpone's desire for Celia, at any cost. And the third weakness is Volpone's overconfidence in his own intelligence and his lack of appreciation of his opponent's intelligence. When his plots are discovered, Volpone is accepting of his punishment, even showing humor and resignation at the outcome.

Voltore

Voltore (also known as The Vulture) is a lawyer who presents Volpone with elaborate gifts. Voltore is not alone in competing for Volpone's estate, since there are two others who are also showering Volpone with gifts. Voltore is a scavenger who seeks the spoils of the dead and who preys on the dying. He helps Volpone in his first trial, securing his acquittal, even suborning witnesses. But Voltore is dangerous, and when Mosca pretends that Volpone is dead and has left Voltore nothing, he engineers the collapse of all Volpone's plotting. Voltore is disbarred and banished when the truth is finally revealed.

The Vulture

See Voltore

Themes

Appearances and Reality

What Volpone and Mosca's victims perceive as reality is not the truth of the play. Each one thinks that he will be made heir to Volpone's fortune. Voltore attempts to deceive the court and is punished when the deception is revealed. Corvino is willing to seduce Volpone with Celia's body, although Corvino is also deceived into thinking Volpone too ill to make use of the young woman. Corbaccio is deceived into sacrificing his son's inheritance in a ploy to make even more money. The reality is that each will be left with less wealth. However, Mosca, whom Volpone trusts without question, is also deceiving Volpone. Mosca is the only participant who clearly understands the depth of the deception.

Class Conflict

On first reading, it is not readily apparent that Volpone is concerned with class, and this is probably because class was not Jonson's concern in writing the play. However, the inequities in punishment provided at the play's conclusion create some questions about the role of class in this play. The judges say that Mosca, "being a fellow of no birth or blood," shall be whipped and then sent to a lifetime in the galleys. His punishment is much more severe than the that of the other participants because he has no social rank. Mosca is seized and dragged from the stage, as he cries out. In contrast, the other men involved accept their punishment, which does not involve whipping, with dignity. Only Mosca, as someone without birth or blood, is subjected to physical punishment and the indignity of being dragged screaming from the court.

Deception

The plot of Jonson's play is based on deception. Each of the three victims attempts to use deception for financial gain. But the victims are each self-deceived. Their willingness to believe allows the game to succeed. Each of the victims attempts to deceive Volpone, as each pretends to be a caring petitioner. Mosca and Volpone deceive each victim with the promise of greater wealth as a return for exorbitant gifts. The deception is largely dependent on none of the victims uniting against Volpone. Thus, when Volpone fakes his death and the three are brought together to witness Mosca's triumph, their joint misery and recognition of their deception leads to Voltore recanting his defense of Volpone.

Greed

It is the victim's greed that permits Volpone's plot. Each victim seeks more wealth than he deserves. And each man attempts to bargain himself into a better position through

more and more extravagant gifts. Volpone is also not immune, but his greed is not for more money but for more fun at his victim's expense. It is Volpone's greedy need to see his victims humiliated that ultimately leads to the plot's unraveling.

Morality

The play's resolution leads to the lesson, which is that greed will result in each man's downfall. Corvino loses his wife and her dowry, which he must repay at three times its worth. Corbaccio is banished to a monastery, and the estate he denied his son is turned over to the son, while the lawyer, Voltore, is disbarred and banished from Venice. Volpone is imprisoned and all his goods are dispersed to a hospital, a just punishment, since Volpone pretended to be ill. The worst punishment is provided to Mosca, who is of a lower class than the other men. Mosca is whipped and sent away to be a prisoner in the galleys for the rest of his life. Each man is justly punished for his greed and the morality of the play's resolution provides an important lesson for the audience.

Victim and Victimization

Volpone puts the definition of victim to the test. The initial victims of the Volpone's plot are victims because they are duped by Volpone into losing money and gifts, and they have enriched Volpone through their victimization. But are they are victimized by Volpone and Mosca or are they victimized by their own greed? They, perhaps, see themselves as victims of Volpone's cruel joke, but the audience would not have sympathized with them. The true victims are Bonario and Celia, who are unjustly accused and convicted of crimes they did not commit. And yet, as punishment is being dispensed in the final act, Celia pleads for the court's mercy for her husband, who would use her so basely.

Style

Act

A major division in a drama. In Greek plays the sections of the drama signified by the appearance of the chorus and were usually divided into five acts. This is the formula for most serious drama, from the Greeks to the Romans, and to Elizabethan playwrights like William Shakespeare. The five acts can sometimes denote the structure of dramatic action, which are exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. The five-act structure was followed until the nineteenth century when Henrik Ibsen combined some of the acts. *Volpone* is a five-act play. The exposition occurs in the first act when the audience learns of Volpone's deception and meets his victims. By the end of Act II, the complication, the audience has learned that Mosca is expanding on Volpone's plans and that Celia is to be catalyst for the climax, which occurs in the next act. The climax occurs in the third act when Celia arrives, is attacked by Volpone, and then is rescued by Bonario. The trial provides the falling action, and the catastrophe occurs in the last act when all the plotting begins to unravel and the punishment is dispensed.

Character

A person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multifaceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. "Characterization" is the process of creating a lifelike person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation. The characters in *Volpone* are stereotypes, since the characters are not well-defined and appear as little more than types. The audience does not really know or understand the character as an individual. For instance, Voltore is a dishonest lawyer, revealing all the stereotypes often associated with this career.

Genre

Genres are a way of categorizing literature. Genre is a French term that means "kind" or "type." Genre can refer to both the category of literature such as tragedy, comedy, epic, poetry, or pastoral. It can also include modern forms of literature such as drama novels or short stories. This term can also refer to types of literature such as mystery, science fiction, comedy or romance. *Volpone* is a comedy.

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for Jonson's play is Venice, which is significant because it automatically signals the audience that this play will deal with a vice. Venice was considered the center of depravity, according to most English thought of the day. The action occurs during the course of a day.

Historical Context

The period from 1576 to 1642 is considered the Golden Age of English drama, although it was probably not golden for those who lived through it. For more than 100 years, farmers had been displaced by enclosure acts that fenced off agricultural land for pastures. This created severe unemployment in the countryside with accompanying high inflation. Crop failures, the threat of war abroad, and brutal religious strife had shaken English society by the time Elizabeth I assumed the throne in 1558. The reign of Elizabeth produced relative stability, but her failure to name a successor brought discontent and the threat of civil war even before her death. The rule of James I was greeted initially with enthusiasm in 1603, but religious, class, and political divisions soon intensified. In spite of this turmoil, or perhaps because of it, the most important drama in Western history was produced during this period. Rural unemployment drove many people to London, making it the largest city in Europe. However, attempts at civil order led to widespread disorder and the establishment of a capitalistic economy in place of the feudal agrarian social order. The writers of this period grappled with new ideas about science and philosophy, religion and politics. In addition, there was also a new emphasis on individual thought, action, and responsibility.

Playwrights thought of themselves as poets, but were not regarded as serious artists, much as we regard screenwriters today. In fact, playwrights turned out a commercial product. Once sold, plays became the property of acting companies and when published, were more likely to bear the name of the acting company than the author's name. It was not until the seventeenth century, when Jonson published his plays (in 1616) and a folio of Shakespeare's works were published (in 1623), did the idea that plays have literary merit occur. But because plays weren't regarded as serious literature, playwrights had the opportunity to deal with any subject that interested them. In 1576, the first permanent theatre was built. This led to greater social status for theatre people. The location was out of town, due to religious problems. Puritans thought actors were sinful, with substandard morals, because the social milieu of the playhouse was loose, and often libertine. There was also the philosophical argument that acting was lying, role-playing. In spite of these problems, plays brought large numbers of people together and correspondingly increased crime and disease, so city officials often sided with Puritans in wanting theatres outside town. Theatres also enticed people from their jobs and so affected trade.

Every script had to be reviewed by the Master of Revels, who could force revisions and censure. Most concerns were with religion and politics, not with sexual content. In a very real sense, religious theology governed politics. Topics that might offend the queen, such as the abdication scene in William Shakespeare's *Richard II,* or incite treason were banned. Some plays might be closed, or might never open for such offenses. In spite of this official censorship, the court and queen, and later king, were huge fans of theatre. Since actors could be arrested as vagrants, they needed the protection of the court and its patronage. Because theatre reached the illiterate, its influence was widely felt. The audience was mostly upper class. Since there was no lighting, plays were presented in the afternoon, and thus, most working people were not able to attend. However,

gentlemen attended, and for a penny (one pence), others could stand in front of the stage and watch. Respectable women could attend, if they were escorted by a male, but prostitutes also attended to increase trade. In spite of many obstacles, such as the open air and problems with English weather, stage presentation and performance overcame the shortcomings of the audience and their lack of a classical education. Although education was growing, its presence was still very limited. Still, even with a limited education, the feeling and ideas of the play could still be grasped and enjoyed by the audience.

Critical Overview

Volpone is Ben Jonson's most popular comedy. The con or swindle was a familiar theme, and one which Jonson found to be a natural topic for comedy, since he also used the swindle in *The Alchemist.* There is little information about how Ben Jonson's *Volpone* was received by the public, since plays were not reviewed during the period in which this play was composed. Instead, response to a play may be determined by examining how often it has been produced in the years since its creation. Yet another way to gauge a play's popularity is through anecdotal evidence: letters, diaries, and journal entries from the period. Most Jonson scholars acknowledge that Jonson's plays were not generally well received. The audience was often loudly critical, and several of Jonson's plays were hissed from the stage. This is not necessarily because the plays were not entertaining or topical, but rather, the play's reception reflected the audience's attitudes toward the author. Jonson is often described as arrogant and difficult. Unfortunately, in the case of *Volpone,* there is little evidence of letters or diaries that re veal the play's initial reception. There is also little information about how long any play remained in production and on the stage during the early part of the seventeenth century. Although all plays were licensed by a government official, the Master of Revels, his original records have not survived, although collected passages were published in 1917. The details of performance that are so readily available in the twentieth century, length and dates of performance and the theatre in which a production played, are not available for the period during which Ben Jonson wrote.

Although there were no critical reviews early in the seventeenth century, within a hundred years, reviews, via letters and other correspondence began to appear. When theatres reopened after the Restoration in 1660, *Volpone* was being staged regularly enough to be noted in correspondence of the late seventeenth century. Among the comments is one by Samuel Pepys, the diarist, who observed that a 1665 production of *Volpone* was a "most excellent play; the best I ever saw, and well acted." However, there are few compliments for Jonson, since many of these writers were intent on dissecting the plot of Jonson's work, looking for inconsistencies and flaws. A 1696 production moved John Dennis to complain that the plot made no sense to him and that Mosca and Bonario's movements, which set up the action of Act III, "seems to me, to be very unreasonable." Dennis's additional complaints deal with characterization and Volpone's actions, which Dennis argues, are inconsistent. In 1709, Richard Steele felt so strongly about Jonson's play that he wondered "why the modern writers do not use their interest in the house to suppress such representations." Since many playwrights owned the theatres in which their plays were staged, Steele contends that they should simply ban some plays, rather than take a chance on boring and turning away the audience. Steele continues by saying that after seeing Jonson's comedy the audience will no longer have any interest in attending comedy, since the audience is required to constantly question the characters and plot, and thus these questions, "will rob us of all our pleasure." These questions on characterization continued to plague *Volpone* throughout the eighteenth century. Peter Whalley noted in 1756 that the character of Sir Politic Would-be "seems to be brought in merely to lengthen out the play," since his

character appears to serve no purpose. However, Whalley differs from many other writers in that he does admire the characters of Volpone and Mosca and finds that their actions in the final act lend themselves to "true comic humour." An anonymous theatre reviewer of 1771 also admired the plot, which he says "is perfectly original, "but the writer goes on to say that that play is best suited to "afford pleasure in the Closet, than on the Stage," since *Volpone* fails to elicit the passion and genius that Shakespeare's plays offer the audience. Jonson was unable to escape Shakespeare's shadow while they both lived, and it appears that 150 years later, the comparisons continued. Certainly, if there had been no Shakespeare, Jonson might be remembered as a greater playwright. But the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras provided some of the greatest dramatic works the Western world has ever known. With competition, such as that offered by William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, John Ford, John Webster, and Cyril Tourneur, Ben Jonson almost becomes lost in a plethora of great dramatists. Of this group, only Shakespeare has emerged with the timelessness of a great playwright. Today, Jonson is staged infrequently, as is the case for all these playwrights except Shakespeare. Frequently, audiences must travel to England to see the great Renaissance plays on stage, while Shakespeare is readily available at theatres or on videos worldwide. Jonson would be even more envious than he was nearly four hundred years ago.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6

Critical Essay #1

Metzger has a Ph.D., and specializes in literature and drama at The University of New Mexico, where she is a Visiting Lecturer in the English Department and an Adjunct Professor in the University Honors Program. In the following essay, she discusses the role of Venice in Ben Jonson's *Volpone.*

The setting for Ben Jonson's *Volpone,* is Venice. Many Renaissance playwrights, including William Shakespeare, used Venice as a setting for their plays, since this location represented, what many Englishmen considered to be the world's center of vice and debauchery. But, it can be argued that Jonson used Venice better than any other playwright because he depicted it in greater detail. This detail was essential, since Jonson used several of the myths associated with Venice its sexuality, its wealth, and its corruption. Ralph Cohen, in his essay, "The Setting of *Volpone,*" points out that Venice is a setting that functions as symbol and theme, presenting a lurid atmosphere. It is this atmosphere that makes the machinations of Volpone and Mosca appear so believable, and which allows the audience to enjoy the plotting. If the setting had been moved to London, Volpone and Mosca's plots would lack any levity, appearing simply evil. But in Venice, the two easily fit into the city's reputation, where they are only performing as Venetian men are expected to perform. This setting is so essential to the performance of this play, that when Jonson published his *Works,* he left the setting of *Volpone* intact, although he changed the setting of *Every Man in His Humour.* Perhaps he realized that *Volponewould* not work in a London setting.

The audience is never allowed to forget that the setting of *Volpone* is Venice. Cohen points out that to remind the audience of the Venetian setting, Jonson creates two visiting Englishmen, who clearly are out of place in this Italian setting. Sir Politic Would-be and Peregrine represent the innocence of the Englishman abroad, and are juxtaposed with the duplicity of the Venetian men. This subplot is sometimes considered a distraction without purpose, as it was for some eighteenth-century critics. But as Cohen notes, the Englishmen's presence separates the Venetian setting from the London performance, and Sir Politic and Peregrine's meeting allows Jonson to "flavor his play with topical comedy without compromising his setting." London audiences can enjoy the antics and misunderstandings of the two innocent travelers and still imagine themselves as more sophisticated visitors should they visit Venice. The ending of the play, with its harsh punishments, can also serve to remind the audience of yet another of Venice's excesses, its reputation for severe punishment, as it makes the audience thankful, once again, to be Englishmen. Mosca, Volpone, and their three intended victims all receive harsh punishments, as the London audience would expect. This serves to contrast with Jonson's London setting for *The Alchemist,* in which the plotting servant is easily forgiven. Cohen states that London audiences would have known of Venice's harsh justice and would have anticipated a severe punishment. The justice dispensed in the last act, in keeping with reality, would have made the London audience grateful to be Englishmen and not citizens of Venice.

The English response to Venice as a place of great interest and excitement, balanced with a certain amount of trepidation, is based largely on the city's dual nature. Venice was both a city of great beauty, defined by its prominent reputation for art and wealth, and a city of sin, defined by an extensive population of courtesans and the lust associated with excessive sexual freedom. It is not as if there were no prostitutes in London; there were. But in Venice there was an openness, with women readily displayed in revealing gowns, that was missing from London society. Somehow, in the warmth of Venice, sexuality appeared more exciting than in the cold, drafty halls of the London court. Consequently, Venice drew many Englishmen to visit, so many, observed McPherson in *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myth of Venice,* that the Pope complained. This duel nature of Venice was also an attraction, since with any adventure, there is an allure in perceived danger. Jonathan Bate quotes a visiting Englishman, whom he says describes Italy as "'a paradise inhabited with devils.'" In his essay, "Elizabethans in Italy," Bate argues that "Italians are characterized by a combination of politeness and perfidy." And yet, there was certainly an attraction to both the politeness and the perfidy. Although many Englishmen were opposed to the Pope and viewed him as a significant threat to Protestant England, Italy remained a popular destination for English visitors. Bate mentions that "since Italy was not a unified country, different impressions were gained from different cities and principalities." Rome had a strong association with the Catholic Pope, but as Bate notes, Venice appeared independent from the Pope and Rome, and it "could be imaged as an anti-Romish island like England itself." Thus Venice could continue to draw tourists to visit, and drew audiences to the theatre. Venice provided the perfect setting warm and sensual, dangerous and wicked, neither England nor Rome. It provides one other attraction as a setting, according to Bate: "Venice is also a place of performances. " Bate mentions that public performance was not limited to the theatre, where women were permitted to act on stage, but ordinary citizens preformed in the streets, with elaborate embraces, kissing, and displays of bare breasts. This street performance is obvious in *Volpone,* when Volpone disguises himself as a Mountebank, who engages in performance upon a small stage, which he erects in the street. The three victims of Volpone's plots are also engaged in performance, as they seek to fool Volpone with their generosity. Of course, Volpone is also directing their performances, all of which illustrate the ease with which Venetians engage in performance, an ease that Jonson adapts to the stage.

Much of the action in *Volpone* is focused on the myths attached to Venice. McPherson says that Venice was frequently described as "rich," and that the city's publicists boasted of the city as the richest city "under the heavens." This wealth is certainly an element in Jonson's play. Volpone is fixated on acquiring more wealth. That he is rich is evidenced in the counting of his riches that occurs in Act I. However, Volpone is not only interested in having more wealth, although it is important to him; instead, he is transfixed by the art of acquiring wealth. This art is also an element of Venice's reputation for political wisdom. McPherson cites the crafty nature of the Venetian, of whom travelers warn, and who should not be trusted. Volpone exemplifies this nature, but he is not alone. Every Venetian male in the play, except for Bonario, is engaged in deception. None of these men is as he appears, and this results in a severe punishment for each. As previously mentioned, Venice enjoyed a reputation for harsh justice. McPherson points out that this Venetian justice "was praised frequently for its severity,"

frequently by visiting Englishmen. At the conclusion of *Volpone,* Celia pleads for leniency, but is abruptly dismissed by the judges, who think her pleas do her a disservice. It would appear that there is no place in Venetian justice for easy dismissals; in this respect, Jonson is echoing reality, where harsh punishments, including the cutting off of hands, a tongue, or even the putting out of an eye, were expected and accepted.

Another important myth of Venice was its reputation for pleasure. McPherson calls Venice "the pleasure capital of Europe," with many of the pleasures being legitimate. There was art and architecture to be admired, wonderful festivals to attend, and great food to be sampled. The Venetians encouraged tourism and it was a major source of revenue, with much effort placed on pleasing these visitors. But among the pleasures to be enjoyed were those associated with prostitution. According to McPherson, "the favorite vice to attribute to the Venetians was sexual licentiousness," a characteristic was well known to the tourists. McPherson asserts that courtesans made up a significant portion of the population, with estimates running at high as 10 percent. This accounts for Lady Politic Would-be's easy acceptance of Mosca's lie that he saw her husband with a courtesan. Any English tourist would have been effortlessly convinced that, although only separated for a short period of time, one's husband might have been readily approached by and seduced by a prostitute. One by-product of the accessibility of courtesans was that their loose style of apparel was adapted by married women. As a result, married men, who frequented these courtesans, worried when their wife adopted the dress of prostitutes. Venetian men responded with jealousy to their wives' new dresses and to their implied threats. Although some women did stray, McPherson says it was difficult, since husbands guarded their wives so carefully. This jealousy is portrayed in *Volpone,* by Corvino's extreme jealousy of Celia.

It is easy to see why Jonson would not have changed the setting of *Volpone* to London. This play exemplifies many of the elements of Venetian society, which are essential to its success on the stage. A Volpone hatching his plots in the cold, wet atmosphere of London would have held no magic for the audience, with the tragic elements outweighing the comic. But transfer Volpone to the warmth of the wealthy, sensual atmosphere of Venice, and the play becomes a comedy, dependent on the illusion of debauchery to awaken its potential.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, in an essay for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Beecher traces the legacy of the prankster leading up to Jonson's comedy Volpone.

It was from the Satiricon of Petronius and Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* that Jonson derived the idea of creating Volpone's Venice as a city of dissemblers divided between he who pretended to infirmity in order to attract gifts and those who feigned friendship and generosity in order to attract the legator's consideration. The patterns of the tale of Eumolpos are visible in the play: the shipwrecked wayfarer who gets rich in a foreign land by posing as a childless old man and by speaking only of his wealth and the rewriting of his testament between fits of coughing. But it was from the tale of the death-feigning fox of medieval legend that Jonson drew the mythological substructure of the play. A Latin bestiary from the twelfth century recounts a version of the tale of the hungry fox who besmears himself with red mud to resemble blood, and who then lies on his back holding his breath in order to attract carrion birds which, as soon as they alight, he grabs and devours. Jonson clearly recognized the analogy between this primordial trickster who maintained himself by audacious cunning and the Romans who fraudulently lured gifts from expectant *captores*. The Roman matter combined with the tradition of Reynard pointed the way towards a more vigorous strain of satiric comedy, such as Jonson had been seeking, one free from the taint of romance and sentimentalism, one which emerged by superimposing the microcosm of the fox upon a portrayal of greed in contemporary society.

Little remains to be said on the thematic and imagistic implications inherent in the allusions to beast fable in *Volpone,* but that the crafty fox serves as an appropriate analogy for the kind of trickster protagonist Jonson depicted is worth further notice. The fox is motivated by a cunning which is instinctual and amoral; he seeks to satisfy fundamental appetites rather than to serve, consciously, any moral or humanitarian ends. His craft is a life-style pervading his entire being and not merely adopted disguise. To the extent that he can be said to be aware of his own acts, the art of pulling a clever jest on the less wary is his supreme joy. His world is a narrow one in which knavery is carried out half as play, half in accordance with the logistics of survival. Such a prankster, with his sheer primitive drive, differs markedly from the festal trickster who assumes disguises in order to achieve precalculated ends, the literary intriguer of learned comedy who presides, by licence, over the creation of rites of passage, gentle ridicule and carnival. Fox is hero in his own world, not servant, and his tricks are the central transaction of the story. In keeping with his nature and the tradition of tales which fostered him, the fox is, typically, now the wily hunter, now the hunted one forced back upon his ruseful resources in order to save his own neck. The tale of the folk trickster contains, characteristically, the waxing hero exulting in his piracy and the waning hero who is made to endure mortification. In *Volpone,* not only is the trickster of folk lore fully accommodated to the English stage as hero, but his rising and falling destiny is redeployed in the context of an intrigue drawn from the conditions of contemporary society. In this lies the substance for a response to Partridge's comment that *Volpone* is "a drama too complex in nature and unique in effect to be encompassed

by the traditional categories." Volpone behaves neither as a romantic hero nor as a tragic one despite his magnificence, the apparent depths of his motivation and his so-called flaw and lamentable catastrophe. But there is a subgenre of comedy implicit in the figure of the trickster hero with its own themes and conventions. The rise of this class of comedy is one of the salient achievements of the English theatre in the Renaissance to which there were notable contributions by several of Jonson's contempories. Yet they were never able to free themselves, as Jonson did, from the established conventions preventing Trickster from arriving at his full dramatic potential. By such a measure *Volpone* attains a special place in the development of intrigue comedy.

If Jonson's handling of the protagonist is an innovative one, it is set even more in relief by the fact that the dramatic tradition which he held in highest esteem, that of Plautus and Terence (and their followers in Renaissance Italy), offered no precedent for the trickster as hero. In Roman comedy he had reached his nadir, both socially and in terms of his ties with the primordial figure. Classical models dictated a highly conventionalized use of the slave whose wits were in the exclusive employ of his master, a commission which invariably entailed, in the cause of true love, the outwitting of a refractory parent or a threatening rival. Though the writers of the *commedia erudita* allowed him more novel disguises and a freer range in their well-honed, multifaceted intrigue plots, he remained a low-life character, monodimensional, subservient to his betters and ever restrained by the variables of plotting which led only to happy issue for the lovers accompanied usually by reconciliation and the promise of carnival. Jonson refers to the Italian character types in justifying his handling of Volpone' s demise and he mentions the ' *'quick comedy, refined as best critics have designed* swerving *From no needful rule"* as the source of the plotting and general ambiance of the play. These were the conventional utterings of a classicist in action and no doubt Jonson believed he was writing a play directly in the learned tradition. *Volpone* is, indeed, classical in its sense of economy of plot, the following of the unities and its critical attitudes towards excess in the spirit of the Roman satirists. But there were no models among the ancients, or their Renaissance imitators, for the kind of captains of intrigue in which Jonson specialized.

There is a sense in which the rise of realist satiric comedy in England was synonymous with the emancipation and diversification of the intriguer figure as internal plotter and satiric persona. Marlowe, Chapman, and Marston all laboured towards that end. Each in his own way raised the station and intelligence of the trickster figure in order to broaden his social currency, which in turn accommodated him more naturally to the contemporary settings and, as a satirist, gave him access to folly in high places. Marston devised the duke in disguise whose high station and lofty moral purpose guided him infallibly through a maze of trials and obstacles. Chapman created the urbane, witty Elizabethan gentleman as intriguer. Lemot *(An Humorous Day's Mirth)* is full of verve which he deploys in wooing the puritanical Florilla from her prayer garden to a lovers' rendezvous. But Chapman's calculated moral programming causes Lemot to teach her a lesson by humiliating and scorning her rather than by seducing her on the spot. The moral design of the trickster-intriguer's role is more veiled in Rinaldo *(All Fools)* and Lodovico *(May Day)* who evince greater sense of the primordial trickster's love of freedom, the outsider's pleasure in controlling the destinies of others, the drive

for personal expression and the joy of sheer waggery. Yet, they remain subordinate in position to the lovers they serve, they are untainted by material ambitions of their own, and they serve plots which must make the metamorphosis from satire into the neutralized atmosphere of festival. The progress of both writers in relation to the dramatic tradition was marked and both achieved a form of literary trickster drama. But it was Jonson who turned the comic intriguer into a self-serving knave, driven by appetite and greed, who set him up as a rich magnifico and the central protagonist of the play. Volpone harbours no concern either for his victims or the good of his society. He is free from all the restraints of the intriguer compounded of conscious literary attitudes and functions. In his new freedom he becomes synonymous with the ancient prankster who had not died out entirely in the native story-telling tradition.

Volpone has no direct literary forebears in the native theatre, but there are a handful of plays which feature prankster rogues, in some cases even as heroes, from which Jonson no doubt drew certain fundamental lessons. Chapman's *Blind Beggar of Alexandria* comes to mind as *Volpone's* closest relative, since the hero is not only a prankster of the first order but styles himself as an oriental magnifico on his way to becoming King of Egypt. In this episodic multi-disguise plot the knave of the Interlude peeks through, without doubt as part of the burlesque of the Marlovian hero Tamburlaine, which Chapman surely intended. Irus sets up a confidence operation in which he poses as a sage clairvoyant who makes prophecies which he is able to fulfil through a series of adopted disguises. His gulls include a nobleman, three beautiful sisters and the Queen herself. His most outrageous achievement is to marry two of the sisters at once, giving the third to his parasite Pego, and then to cuckold himself twice by seducing each wife as the husband of the other. (Of course, by eliminating a disguise he could eliminate a wife, a rather neat trick in any age.) The play has none of Jonson's hard polish or satiric intensity, but it does prefigure the ambitious master trickster in love with power and sheer devilry. A detail of interest is that Pego, like Mosca, reminds his master at the end of the action of all he knows and could reveal about Irus' devious climb to power and so claim a greater share in the spoils. Chapman lets the matter fall because the parody would have collapsed with the mortification of the hero, but he was aware of the dramatic potential in the situation. That this play has so many correspondences with Volpone should be submitted with the caveat that it belonged, at the same time, to a class of multiple-disguise plots, which by 1600 had run its course with such plays as *Look About You* and *The Blind Beggar of Bednal Green* and had all but disappeared. More important, Irus is a mono-dimensional figure who lacks those qualities which pertain to the trickster of folklore.

The folk trickster, in his most fully realized state, possesses a double nature which makes him both the hunter and the hunted at once. He is an outsider who is both a marauder and a mocker who shames his victims into conformity. He maintains at once the ways of the prophet and apostate, the benefactor and the bandit. It is this inter-relationship of opposites which is the key to his character. Endemic to trickster is what Herford and Simpson called "the fatuities of the overweening." The more dangerous and thus exhilarating the exploit, the greater the risks in executing it, and thus the greater the risks of being cashiered. Self-confidence blinds and the greatest tricksters invariably precipitate themselves towards error or self-betrayal. This dual nature does not make

the character complex in himself, but it provokes complex reactions in those who watch him pass through a society. In Volpone the benefactor's contribution, the satiric exposure of gulls, is a by-product of the trickster's own pursuit of wealth, pleasure, and, above all, the joys of artful intrigue.

I glory

More in the cunning purchase of my wealth,

Then in the glad possession; since I gaine

No common way (1.1.30-3),

declares Volpone. Even when all hope of gain is past, he takes to the streets in another disguise for the sheer delight of further plaguing his victims. The double denouement of *Volpone* is in perfect keeping with the character of the pristine trickster; like Chaucer's Russell the fox in *The Nun's Priest's Tale,* who now enjoys the victory of his sophistry, now suffers humiliation for his folly, Volpone knows perfect success before he puts his head in the noose.

The Winnabago trickster cycle, which is one of the finest of the Amer-indian literary legacies, offers several examples of this dual nature of the trickster. In a rapid succession of tales the hero demonstrates his remarkable inventiveness and his naive stupidly. In one adventure he seduces the chief's daughter across a lake with his infinitely extendible penis; in another he allows it to be whittled down to size by a sharp-toothed wood-chuck while employing it to prod the beast out of a hollow log. In this way trickster forfeits his god-like phallus, yet redeems himself as a benefactor by planting the retrieved pieces which produce edible tubers of great value to his tribe. Trickster stories generically tell how the hero both deceives and is deceived in keeping with his nature; both tales are seen to be equally comic.

Trickster undertakes these adventures merely to express himself, amuse and furnish himself, which he cannot do unless he has a society to sport with, nor can he pass through that society without altering it for better or for worse. Jonson realized that the best story is not that in which the trickster is made to carry the author's moral burden as part of his own psychological outlook and the rationalizing voice behind his every deed, but that story in which he struggles to do his worst and nevertheless produces an unforseen good. Volpone was Jonson's ironic maker who created a well-turned comic artifact which both teaches and delights. As in the earlest trickster tales, Jonson sees how social benefit, cultural development and moral stability come about by accident through the civilizing force of trickster.

Comedy depends for its success on its capacity to regulate the degrees of distance between the action and the observer, between the artifice which feigns the real and the intellectually perceived values and judgements which the play raises. This has to do with the kind and degree of spectator involvement with the actions and characters. The fully realized trickster hero poses certain problems which Jonson renders particularly subtle by superimposing in the plot of *Volpone* the tales of the fox in the ascendant and

the fox in decline. The fox in the ascendant invites a special attachment. Mosca boasts that he can ' *"Shoot through the aire, as nimbly as a starre,"* which we must admire, in spite of lingering moral reservations. In the combined performance of these two knaves there are brilliant deceptions, a compelling use of verbiage and sheer audacity. Their intrigues are carried out in an atmostphere of serious play. We support their strategies in a context from which we are eager to transfer the joys of the victors to ourselves, the fundamental goal of any spectator sport. Jonson has arranged for our involvement and carries us with them to the pinnacle of success. After extricating themselves from the court scene in Act IV, Mosca gloats and warns at once:

Here, we must rest; this is our master-peece;

We cannot thinke, to goe beyond this (V.2.13-14).

Irony abounds as we discover just how far beyond this they are determined to go. But for a moment we sense the full flush of victory, the satisfaction of having prevailed momentarily in a situation of pure knavery. In a related sense, we also abandon ourselves to the entire topsy-turvy world as to a carnival. L. A. Beaurline suggests in reaction to the overmoralized views of Jonson's comedy, that it should be viewed as having "a more relaxed, playful air, tempting spectators to enjoy and perhaps give tacit assent to decadent but delightful release of inhibitions." Here is therapy through the release of aberrant impulses and through self-projection into the illusions of the comic theatre.

Jonson's own best trick as comedian is to let us align ourselves with the rogues until we too are exposed for our complicity. We are fascinated by the dizzying centrifugal force of the intrigue, the ever more daring ventures and the more spectacular saves. In the spirit of play we want the game to go on and we invite the heroes to greater dangers, seeking for ourselves, as does Volpone, one last *"rare meale of laughter."* At the same time we are implicated in the moral ambiguities of their behavior. Through the introduction of a code of legal values into this world of criminal schemes, our involvement in the sport is brought up short. We are forced to detach ourselves through sober reflection. But it is not a reflection about the personal destiny of the hero. He is but the animator of a whirligig which carries us along until the scheme explodes from sheer internal pressure.

This brings us to the tale of the trickster in defeat. Trickster out-tricked is never tragic; his foolishness leads him to the absurd which is risible by definition. He never laments his fate and does not ask it of others. As Paul Radin explained, the aboriginal trickster can never be philosophically motivated, for the moment he becomes self-conscious, his powers to act capriciously and ruthlessly are impeded by his own mind. Volpone never reflects upon his deeds; when he goes down he is merely deflated. As Quomodo, the intriguer in *Michaelmas Term,* says after he is caught out, *"for craft, once known, /Does teach fools wit, leaves the deceiver none."* The trickster is a born overreacher, engaging in his successes, comic in his defeat. The Lord Admiral's Men kept a bevy of such plays in their repertory, perhaps best characterized by the title of the now lost play, *'Tis No Deceit to Deceive a Deceiver,* indicating both the degree of comic justice and the lack of

culpability which pertained to the central transaction of the play. Volpone shares in common with such plays the tradition of the rogue repaid in kind.

Una Ellis-Fermor speaks more appropriately of Samson than of Volpone when she says that "with one last terrific gesture, utterly unbefitting a comedy and all but precipitating it into tragedy, Volpone pulls down disaster upon himself and his enemy alike." She goes on to compare him with the Duchess of Malfi who stood so nobly alone in the final hour of her life. But such reflections hail from romantic sensibilities alien to Jonson's comedy. To be sure, with the proper degree of abstraction, a sense of the narrowing sphere of operations and the feigned sickness and death which prevent Volpone from returning to a state of normalcy may be nursed into intimations of tragedy. One may assume that Volpone's desperate rush for the rewards of the game, for wealth and sexual pleasure, reflect a degree of fear, longing, and a suspicion that all is a cheat. Something Faustian can be teased out of the patterns of mutability, the *carpe diem* images, the grandeur of Volpone's stature and the fact that he loved the sport more than the rewards. Such a Volpone must go down, unfulfilled, a victim to insensitive justice. But Marlowe, himself, saw the other side in Barabas the Jew of Malta, who plays his hand in a serious game with malicious verve and vitality. In the end he, too, is double-crossed and finds himself in a boiling cauldron destined for his enemies, where he continues to shout in a final burst of remorselessness. Like *Volpone*, this play defies easy categorization and for many of the same reasons, including its parody of tragedy. T. S. Eliot called it a "serious farce." No gull is so comic as he who believes that everyone else is his gull. That irony excites laughter in the cases of Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino. So it must when Volpone and Mosca follow suit. And where we must laugh at the knave we must also laugh at ourselves if we have been so tender as to take him to our bosom.

In *Volpone* Jonson achieved, willy-nilly, a resurrection of trickster comedy with his promotion of the comic intriguer to the level of a guileful voluptuory. He recaptured the fundamental antinomies of the trickster nature, the scourge and the buffoon, and he understood the alternating of tales of success and failure. There is one further innovation to Jonson's credit in this play, namely the mechanism required to reveal dramatically these two sides of trickster's nature. Jonson's technique was to develop the conventionally static relationship between master and and servant into a dynamic one in which the parasite uses his inside position to defraud his patron, thereby reversing the fortunes of the protagonists. The concept was available to Jonson in a number of seminal forms, any of which he could have relied upon for triggering his management of the denouement in *Volpone*. The master-servant relationship in drama is at least as old as Aristophanes and no doubt was the substance of comic scenes in the mimes before that. Plautus' Palaestrio in the *Miles Gloriosus* is perhaps the most outstanding example from the Roman period of the slave whose wit enabled him to abuse his master relentlessly even while he was busy cozening him out of his mistress. So effective is the flattery that he is able to get away with money, the girl (who is restored to her former lover), and his own freedom. A different model, nearer to hand, is the Ithamore-Barabas entente in the *The Jew of Malta* in which Ithamore tries to blackmail his master and, failing that, manages to confess all of his nefarious deeds before Barabas' poisoned flower was able to silence him. Here is a sequence of double-dealing prefiguring the double betrayals in *Volpone.* Herford and Simpson argue cogently for an even nearer

source in Jonson's own Roman history play *Sejanus* which deals essentially with "the league of two noble villains, master and servant, ending in a deadly struggle between them." It was through a development of this pattern that Jonson found the means to mortify his fox. Jonson's handling of the denouement of *Volpone* is a variation on the plot of the servant who attempts to usurp his master's wealth and position. Both villains struggle in a contest for supremacy with an uncertain outcome. Such an employment of trickster bears little relation to the witty servant of romance comedy whose success is guaranteed by the sacredness of the cause he espouses. Master and servant, in turning upon one another in active combat, produce a wholly different model of action through which the satirist can indict the follies of greed and ambition.

In *Volpone* both the patron and the parasite ostensibly work together; both are tricksters wholly dependent upon one another for the advancement of their confidence game. Yet by degrees, the audience comes to appreciate Mosca's burgeoning sense of independence. The high-tide of their confederacy and the height of Mosca's sense of injured merit arrive simultaneously. When the gulling of the others was complete there was no other direction possible except an internecine struggle. The imperturbable Mosca took note of his master's nervous sweating during the court scene and counted it for a weakness. Where he had been wont to say *"Alas, sire, I but doe, as I am taught; / Follow your graue instructions"* he changed for, "*You are not taken with it, enough, me thinkes?"* Mosca has not only been in disguise to the gulls, but to Volpone as well, with his camouflage of flattery. Yet if Volpone underestimated his knave for cunning, the latter underestimated his master for pride and stubbornness. This was the final phase of the game by which they had lived and sportsman-like they carried it through to the victory or the defeat which every such context must hold in store. It is in precisely that spirit that Mosca declares his intentions:

To cosen him of all, were but a cheat

Well plac'd; no man would construe it a sinne:

Let his sport pay for't, this is call'd the Foxe-trap.

Mosca had not calculated Volpone's one remaining trump, that one which was furnished by the conventions of comic art. Volpone opted to strip away his mask, preferring a double check-mate to an uncontested victory for his parasite. Justice was ready to serve sentence once the truth was out, but it was the last all-or-nothing toss which brought about that revelation. In this way the two cats of Kilkenny reduced themselves to none.

Trickster is the comic projection of one dimension of human nature, a greater-than-life embodiment of the appetites which he attempts to satisfy through his wits. Success and failure alike bring laughter to those who look on. Such a being delights in imposing his view of the world upon others, who often imagine themselves to be doing the same but who are merely victims of delusions and self-betrayal. This is why the trickster is so valuable to the comic plotter and to the satirist. The essence of the character is unchanging, but individual tricksters are always products of national mentalities and

individual geniuses working on the materials of their own times and cultures. Jonas Barish claimed that "the most obvious trait of Jonson's style, its realism, thus brings to a climax a process toward which comedy had been moving for generations, perhaps since its origins." Jonson, in Volpone, was on his way home from his literary peregrinations in the classical world and on the verge of finding comedy in the streets and halls of London. His revival of old forms was partially an archeological enterprise, but he made his forms appear to spring sui generis from the unique circumstances generated in his plays. Jonson's vision was to see the diverse manifestations of social traffic regulated by a variety of trickster figures who incorporate self-interest and accidental benefaction, who are moral legislators and buffoons, and who, as mischievous masters of ceremony, produce new order through the comic justice in the plays whose intrigues they unwittingly design. In keeping with his picture of a society driven by greed and rapaciousness Jonson devised the confidence artist as hero. It was a master stroke, taking the trickster hero to his apogee in Volpone after a long period of development. Marlowe, Chapman, and Marston had already supplied trickster with new guises and contemporary habiliments, but Jonson freed him from conventional roles, from socio-moral subservience, rediscovering the dual nature of the primal folk hero. These alterations had such a powerful reorienting effect that the standard definitions of comedy must expand to accommodate them.

Source: Don Beecher, "The Progress of Trickster in Ben Jonson's *Volpone,"* in *Cahiers Elisabethains,* April, 1985, Vol. 27, pp. 43-51.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Manlove argues that the "instructive" and the "delightful" elements of the play are "increasingly opposed during the play."

Current discussions of the "instructive" and "delightful" elements in Volpone *(1604) tend, variously, to accept that both are united to give a single dramatic effect. The object of this article is to reargue the case that the two elements are increasingly opposed during the play.*

In common with the comedy next written by Jonson *The Alchemist* (1610) the subject of *Volpone* is the gulling of dupes for profit by schemers; there are many incidental points of similarity in the plots and "humours" of both plays. Yet *Volpone* has a character very different from that of *The Alchemist.* Where Jonson's story of the magnifico is set in the luxurious and exotic world of Venice, *The Alchemist* takes place in London, in the house of the bourgeois Lovewit. In *Volpone* the bumbling English traveller, self-appointed man of the world and manipulator, Sir Politic Would-be, and his wife, whose assumptions of refinement only the more surely reveal her vulgarity, point up the gulf between the English temperament and that of the supersubtle Venetians, to the advantage of the latter. The world of *Volpone* is on a far grander scale than that of *The Alchemist* or *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). Volpone has enormous wealth and is surrounded by an array of dwarves, eunuchs and parasites who minister to him and execute his purposes. He demands far more of those he gulls than Subtle and Face do in *The Alchemist.* Not only does he demand large sums of money or valuable jewels and plate, but he even demands of the obsessively jealous Corvino, his own wife. The most in this respect which Subtle and Face ask in The Alchemist is his sister of Kastriland her name is Pliant. Moreover, the performance in court of one of Volpone's dupes, the lawyer Voltore, goes far beyond that required of any character in the later play: when, at Volpone's instigation, he for a second time retracts a false case made by him against previous defendants, he pretends to have been possessed and feigns a fit in which he vomits out "evil spirits." The nearest we come to this performance in *The Alchemist* is Dapper's enforced sojourn in the jakes. In *The Alchemist* too the payments exacted by Face and Subtle of their clients Mammon's andirons, the dollars of the Puritans, Drugger's tobacco or portague, Dapper's twenty nobles or his "paper with a spur-ryal in't" are trivia by comparison, typified by the final inventory of the "confederacy":

Face. Mammon's ten proud; eight score before. The Brethern's money, this. Drugger's and Dapper's. What paper's that?

Dol. The jewel of the waiting maid's, That stole it from her lady, to know certain

Face. If she should have precedence of her mistress?

Subt. Yes.

Dol. What box is that?

Subt. The fishwives' rings I think, And th' alewives' single money. Is't not, Dol?

Dol. Yes, and the whistle that the sailor's wife Brought you to know and her husband were with Ward.

Face. We'll wet it tomorrow; and our silver beakers, And tavern cups. Where be the French petticoats, And girdles, and hangers?

Subt. Here, i' the trunk, And the bolts of lawn.

Face. Is Drugger's damask there? And the tobacco? (V. iv. 108-21)

With these vulgar commodities we can be more familiar, as indeed with the wishes of most of the gulls. But with the desire of the rich to be richer still, as we find it in *Volpone,* there is much less scope for this level of engagement.

The motives of the gullers are also different. Volpone loves wealth not because it gives material or social advancement, but because it gives power: he is in his way a megalomaniac. He is by no means a miser, for he keeps an extensive house and has luxurious tastes. He simply worships money because of its magnetic strength of attraction, its power to break all other links which stand in its way and draw in its victims. Wealth is seen as the focus of the universe:

Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is

The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun

Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram,

Am I, to view thy splendor darkening his;

That lying here, amongst my other hoards,

Showst like a flame by night, or like the day

Struck out of chaos, when all darkness fled

Unto the center. O thou son of Sol,

But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,

With adoration, thee, and every relic

Of sacred treasure in this blessed room.

Every other value is transcended, swallowed by wealth, until riches become God himself. Volpone sees the substance that is gold, like God, reducing all else to shadow by its sheer facticity:

Thou being the best of things, and far transcending

All style of joy in children, parents, friends,

Or any other waking dream on earth.

What fascinates him is the image of the stasis of wealth that puts all other things in a state of flux, the sheer inertia of this mineral which engrosses to itself all states of existence or value that are above it in the scale of being:

Dear saint,

Riches, the dumb god that givst all men tongues,

That canst do nought, and yet mak' st men do all things;

The price of souls; even hell, with thee to boot,

Is made worth heaven! Thou art virtue, fame,

Honor, and all things else. Who can get thee,

He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise

In these lines Olympian detachment combines with complete commitment: Volpone speaks in apparently detached wonder at the power of gold and yet can testify to that power over himself. In the last three lines he is saying both, "You subsume all value," and "Look how benighted man is, that he will attribute to one who is wealthy all spiritual value." This double position of involvement and ironic distance is the key to Volpone's motivation in the play: it enables him to jest while he is in earnest, to laugh at the follies of the gulls who seek his money while he delights in the power of, and homage paid to, his wealth. The essence is to do nothing while others do everything: as his gold is "lying here," so too does Volpone for most of the play on his sick bed, attended by a constant succession of would-be heirs. The stress is on the enclosed nature of his world: he does not go out to get his wealth, for it comes to him without his stir; he does not have an impact upon the outside world, for that world is pleased to visit him:

I gain

No common way: I use no trade, no venture;

I wound no earth with ploughshares; fat no beasts

To feed the shambles; have no mills for iron,

Oil, corn, or men, to grind' em into powder;

I blow no subtle glass; expose no ships

To threat'nings of the furrow-faced sea;

I turn no monies in the public bank,

Nor usure private (I. i. 32^1-0)

What begins as a picture of the sophisticated manner in which he makes his gold turns into a protestation of innocence "I do not interfere with the world." But it is interesting that he conceives the hurting which he has avoided more as a hurting of things, not of people: the earth is not wounded except under the terms of the pathetic fallacy, or unless one considers the earth to be animate. Fatting beasts to feed the shambles is not generally considered cruelty. The upset of hierarchy behind Volpone's words is seen in the way he speaks of "iron, / Oil, corn, or men" as the same sort of commodity for mills and in his picture of the mills as causing suffering to inanimate substance the same way they cause suffering to men ("grind 'em into powder"). Thus when he speaks of ships rather than of men exposed "To threat'nings of the furrow-faced sea," we are inclined to take the ships simply as vessels rather than as vessels containing men an inclination reinforced by the animate status given to the sea. Aware, no doubt, that this protestation of innocence is somewhat misdirected, Mosca now turns it to more human contexts:

No, sir, nor devour

Soft prodigals. You shall ha' some will swallow

A melting heir as glibly as your Dutch

Will pills of butter, and ne'er purge for't;

Tear forth the fathers of poor families

Out of their beds, and coffin them, alive,

In some kind, clasping prison, where their bones

May be forthcoming, when the flesh is rotten.

But, your sweet nature doth abhor these courses;

You loathe the widow's or the orphan's tears

Should wash your pavements, or their piteous cries

Ring in your roofs, and beat the air for vengeance (I. i. 40 51)

He covers a range of impact from the soft prodigals, who might deserve their loss, to the innocent, who would not: again the portrayal of Volpone's guiltlessness is founded on his self-enclosure, not on any distinction he makes between those who deserve fleecing and those who do not. Moreover, in the very manner which Mosca paints the refusal of

his master's "sweet nature" to seize on the undeserving and cause pain to their families, along with his equal refusal to "devour" prodigals and "melting heir[s]," we see that no such sweet motive really exists; we are nearer the truth in Volpone's objection to any invasion of his privacy by tears washing his pavements or by piteous cries ringing in his roofs (an objection portrayed in his reactions to Lady Would-be throughout the play).

What we have in Volpone is a man whose scale of values is entirely perverted by money, but who, at the same time, without applying the condition to himself, is able to see how wealth overthrows all values in other people. He is a man who has taken on an Olympian position, but who himself is one of those he mocks a man who is in a fundamentally ironic position throughout the play. Hence, a part of his weakness is that he who manipulates others can himself be manipulated. Mosca is not plotting Volpone's ruin when he raises his interest in Corvino's wife Celia in terms of her likeness to gold; he is playing on his master's Pavlovian responses:

Bright as your gold! and lovely as your gold!

Volp. Why had not I known this before?

Mos. Alas, sir, Myself but yesterday discovered it.

Volp. How might I see her?

Mos. O, not possible; She's kept as warily as is your gold, Never does come abroad, never takes air But at a window. (I. v. 114-20)

Celia, spiritually Volpone's opposite, is like him and his wealth in that she never goes out to the world (though in her case she is imprisoned). Yet, this portrait of her by Mosca draws Volpone to abandon his usual posture: he is forced to go out to someone rather than have them come to him. That inconsistency is in fact the beginning of his undoing.

Like his master, Mosca is at pains to disconnect himself from the world, even from himself:

Success hath made me wanton.

I could skip Out of my skin, now, like a subtle snake,

I am so limber. O! your parasite

Is a most precious thing, dropped from above,

Not bred' mongst clods and clodpolls, here on earth. (III. i. 5-9)

He goes on to distinguish himself from inferior sorts of parasites whom he sees as tied to the earth and to pleasing the senses of their masters:

I mean not those that have your bare town-art,

To know who's fit to feed 'em; have no house,

No family, no care, and therefore mold

Tales for men's ears, to bait that sense; or get

Kitchen-invention, and some stale receipts

To please the belly, and the groin; nor those,

With their court-dog-tricks, that can fawn and fleer,

Make their revenue out of legs and faces,

Echo my lord, and lick away a moth. (III. i. 14-22)

In some degree, by thus refusing the conventional image of the parasite, Mosca is denying that he is, finally, dependent on his master in the way that others are a prognostic of his later truancy. The picture of his own class of parasite which follows continues the idea of separation from the earth in the vision of his movements in terms of an aerial being:

But your fine, elegant rascal, that can rise

And stoop, almost together, like an arrow;

Shoot through the air as nimbly as a star;

Turn short as doth a swallow; and be here,

And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;

Present to any humour, all occasion;

And change a visor swifter than a thought. (III. i. 22-29)

In the last two lines the notion of constant metamorphosis is so pitched as to suggest total loss of any inner and fixed identity. Indeed it is by constant movement, rather than the stasis of other parasites, that Mosca characterizes himself an interesting contrast with Volpone's praise of his gold or with his own supine position for most of the play. Mosca further separates true parasites from the idea of earthliness or from any public dependency when he makes a Horatian distinction between those parasites who are born dependent and those who have to learn the craft:

This is the creature had the art born with him;

Toils not to learn it, but doth practice it

Out of most excellent nature: and such sparks

Are the true parasites, others but their zanies. (III. i. 30-33)

The true parasite is not dependent on anything outside himself for the knowledge of his craft; we are reminded of Volpone's severance from the world.

Both Volpone and Mosca have a form of creative delight in their schemes: the gulling of Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore is engineered not so much for gain as for the pleasure that results from skillfully-managed deception and for the mirth that arises, whether from the success of the deceptions themselves or from the way that the gulls are only too ready to assist in their own duping. After Mosca has persuaded Corbaccio to disinherit his son and make Volpone his heir, expecting that out of gratitude for such generosity the dying Volpone will in turn make Corbaccio his heir, Volpone is almost beside himself with laughter:

O, I shall burst!

Let out my sides, let out my sides. *Mas.* Contain

Your flux of laughter, sir. You know this hope

Is such a bait it covers any hook.

Volp. O, but thy working, and thy placing it!

I cannot hold; good rascal, let me kiss thee.

I never knew thee in so rare a humor. (I. iv. 132-38)

Typical of their relationship is the mobility with which Mosca engineers the fun for the static Volpone to enjoy, and typically, too, he cunningly disclaims responsibility and dupes his master:

Alas, sir, I but do as I am taught;

Follow your grave instructions; give 'em words;

Pour oil into their ears, and send them hence

Volp. Tis true, 'tis true. (I. iv. 13942)

This delight in creativity, however perverse, gives enormous zest and energy to the play. Such energy is missing from *The Alchemist,* where the gulling of people who believe in the powers of alchemy is carried on specifically as a business venture for gain by the league of Dol, Face and Subtle.

It is an energy which, however immoral by all the canons, themes or imagery of the play, threatens to upset the norms invoked. Here it is worth contrasting Volpone with the luxur of *The Alchemist,* Sir Epicure Mammon. When Volpone is attempting to seduce

the virtuous Celia, he tries to sway her with a picture of the sensuous delights they may both share:

See, behold,

[Pointing to his treasure.}

What thou art queen of; not in expectation,

As I feed others, but possessed and crowned.

See, here, a rope of pearl, and each more orient

Than that the brave Egyptian queen caroused;

Dissolve and drink 'em. See, a carbuncle

May put out both the eyes of our St. Mark;

A diamond would have bought Lollia Paulina

When she came in like star-light, hid with jewels

That were the spoils of provinces; take these,

And wear, and lose 'em: yet remains an earring

To purchase them again, and this whole state.

A gem but worth a private patrimony

Is nothing; we will eat such at a meal.

The heads of parrots, tongues of nightingales,

The brains of peacocks, and of ostriches

Shall be our food, and, could we get the phoenix,

Though nature lost her kind, she were our dish. (III. vii. 188-205)

Unnatural, of course, but beautiful and alive. The rhythm almost enacts Mosca's picture of the true parasite, rising, stopping, shooting and turning. The run-on lines make these pleasures mobile, not stagnant, as do the rising and dipping rhythms: "See, behold... /Dissolve and drink 'em"; "See, a carbuncle /... That were the spoils of provinces" (not quite a full close, followed by the dolphin-like rhythm of "take these, / And wear, and lose 'em: yet remains an earring / To purchase them again, and this whole state"). Compare this with Mammon:

I will have all my beds blown up, not stuffed:

Down is too hard. And then mine oval room

Filled with such pictures as Tiberius took

From Elephantis, and dull Aretine

But coldly imitated. Then, my glasses

Cut in more subtle angles, to disperse

And multiply the figures as I walk

Naked between my succubae. My mists

I'll have of perfume, vapored 'bout the room,

To loose our selves in; and my baths like pits

To fall into; from whence we will come forth

And roll us dry in gossamer and roses. (II. ii. 41-52)

The rhythm is no longer various, but stops and starts in short breaths, flopping inert at each cadence: "Down is too hard," "From Elephantis," "But coldly imitated," "To loose our selves in," "To fall into." Where in Volpone's lines the partial cadences come on significant injunctions, here we see them fall on mere desultory afterthoughts, "Down is too hard," "From Elephantis," "and dull Aretine / But coldly imitated." Each item is one in a list, and has a corresponding deadness: "my beds," "And then mine oval room," "Then, my glasses," "my succubae," "My mists," "my baths"; and his continual use of "my" limits his pleasure by possession, where Volpone's impersonal pleasures seem more independent and alive. It seems apt that the element of collapse losing, falling and rollingshould become explicit in the last lines. Mammon's speech continually deflates itself rhythmically, pointing up not only his limited sensual capacity, but puncturing the absurdity of his pictures "I will have all my beds blown up, not stuffed; / Down is too hard," "multiply the figures as I walk / Naked between my succubae" (suggesting sudden detumescence).

Other features in *Volpone* besides the energy and creative delight of both Volpone and Mosca make our and Jonson's attitude to them more complex than simple condemnation, although the imagery and their thematic placing by such standards as inversion of value or self-enclosure ask us to condemn them. For one thing, all the would-be heirs whom Volpone and Mosca gull are portrayed either as disgusting and depraved birds of prey (Corbaccio, Corvino and Voltore) or as vulgar fools (Lady Would-be), so that we can be led to feel that their manipulation gives Volpone and Mosca a certain moral credit, however much they share their standards of value. Secondly, the energy and wit of Volpone and Mosca, when compared to the stupid monomanias of

their victims, make us admire the former for reasons which have little to do with morality, in precisely the way that we admire a fine performance.

What then of Jonson's view? In *The Alchemist* the schemer Face is forgiven at the end for his practices when the master of the house returns, and that master's name is Lovewit. Of course, neither the deeds nor the mind of Face are in any way as corrupt as those of Volpone, and there is less to forgive; however, the name, Lovewit, nonetheless reveals the draw on Jonson himself to admire a scheme well and wittily handled. We may also observe that his bringing in the virtuous innocents in *Volpone* may well have been the product of a sense that the play was getting up and walking away with the moral nail; conversely, from his dedicatory Epistle, we know how uneasy Jonson subsequently was at the way he hammered it down again. As we have said, the effect of surrounding Volpone and Mosca with evil and stupid characters is to make them the more admirable, however much their language and attitudes may reveal moral perversion: it may be that, aware of this, Jonson tried to make sure of damning Volpone and Mosca by having them hurt innocence as well. The result, as has often been remarked, is unfortunate: Celia and Bonario, not belonging to the world of the action, come as a jolt, not least in their language:

Forbear, foul ravisher! libidinous swine!

He leaps out from where MOSCA *had placed him.*

Free the forced lady, or thou diest, impostor.

But that I am loth to snatch thy punishment

Out of the hand of justice, thou shouldst yet

Be made the timely sacrifice of vengeance,

Before this altar, and this dross, thy idol.

[Points to the gold.]

Lady, let's quit the place, it is the den

Of villainy; fear nought, you have a guard;

And he ere long shall meet his just reward. (III. vii. 267-75)

This language recalls the stridency of the brothers of the Lady in Milton's *Comus;* it has even the smack of some of Jonson's I'uritanical figures about it. That Jonson feels the need to insert such a direct judgment into the play suggests that he feels Volpone to be flying above moral censure.

What control Jonson has over Volpone and Mosca comes as we have seen through the imagery of perversion; it should also come through the plot. For at the end Jonson tells

us through the First Advocate that the play has demonstrated a process whereby evil eventually always destroys itself: "Mischiefs feed / Like beasts, till they be fat, and then they bleed" (V. xii. 150-51). The point is that Volpone and Mosca are not to be stopped by outside forces (Bonario and Celia are easily outwitted and imprisoned thanks to the twisted testimony of Volpone's dupes in court), but stopped by a process which will more fully educate the reader in the nature of evil, a process involving spontaneous combustion. First Volpone, having heard of the beauties of Corvino's wife Celia, goes forth disguised to see her. Then Mosca eventually succeeds in persuading Corvino to bring her to his master at a fixed time. Meanwhile Mosca brings Corbaccio's son Bonario to overhear his father disinherit him before Volpone (and so perhaps be fired to slay his parent, leaving Volpone heir), but when he arrives at Volpone's house he finds that Corvino, anxious to make certain of his chances, has come with Celia before he was due. Mosca therefore places the now suspicious Bonario out of hearing in a book gallery, hoping to keep him there and to delay Corbaccio's approach while Volpone interviews Celia. Nevertheless, Bonario does overhear Volpone with Celia, and the first court case must then ensue if he is to be silenced.

We may at this stage ask whether Mosca might not have sent Corvino home again rather than compound his difficulties with a "Well, now there's no helping it, stay here " ; and we may too ask why Mosca is wrong in his calculation that Bonario will not hear anything from the gallery (we are not told that he has come any nearer, but that ' *'he leaps out from where Mosca had placed hinC '* (III. vii. 268)).

In court Bonario and Celia are both discredited, not only through the machinations of Volpone's dupes, particularly the lawyer Voltore, but through the corrupt timeserving nature of the advocates; outside factors will not be able to destroy Volpone. When Volpone returns from court, he says,

Well, I am here, and all this brunt is past.

I ne'er was in dislike with my disguise

Till this fled moment. Here, 'twas good, in private,

But in your public *Cave,* whilst I breathe.

(V. i.But instead of resolving to lie quiet for a time and consolidate his success, he decides to proceed even further in his schemes. His reason is that if he did not he might fall ill of his fears:

A many of these fears

Would put me into some villainous disease

Should they come thick upon me. I'll prevent 'em.

Give me a bowl of lusty wine to fright

This humor from my heart. Hum, hum, hum!

He drinks. 'Tis almost gone already; I shall conquer.

Yet he does not stop there:

Any device, now, of rare, ingenious knavery

That would possess me with a violent laughter,

Would make me up again, (V. i. 14-16)

This scheme, of course, eventually becomes one of making Mosca his heir. The motivation is clearly tenuous. That the cautious fox should so risk himself with another plot goes against the grain of what we expect; that he should attempt this scheme even when most of the unanticipated motive for so doing has been removed by the drink is even more hard to accept. Mosca, when now called for, puts the first point:

We must here be fixed;

Here we must rest. This is our masterpiece;

We cannot think to go beyond this (V. ii. 12-14)

and Volpone later is astonished at how we could have been so foolish:

To make a snare for mine own neck! And run

My head into it wilfully, with laughter!

When I had newly 'scaped, was free and clear!

Out of mere wantonness! O, the dull devil

Was in this brain of mine when I devised it. (V. xi 1-5)

Even then he does not know that his scheme has allowed Mosca to betray him. One wonders how Volpone proposed to undo the trick. One solution might have been for him to have servants take him to court on a stretcher and there to claim that Mosca had locked him up and forged a will in his favour (we are told that only the name has to be filled in (V. ii. 71-73)). Clearly Volpone had no such notion in mind: he seems to have been determined to blow up the gulls' hopes for good, without considering what they could do against him in reply ("I will begin e'en now to vex 'em all, / This very instant" (V. ii. 56-57)).

Again, Volpone could have used the way out just suggested when he discovers Mosca has betrayed him (and after he has just beaten his breast over his previous stupidity). Instead he goes to the court to bargain with Mosca and then, that failing, to bring down his parasite with himself by disclosing his own identity. If we are to take this behavior as

typical of him, we must begin to find the name "Volpone" (the fox) a little inapposite. The more reasonable view here, however, is surely that the motivation is thin and that this thinness is unconsciously deliberate on Jonson's part. He is unwilling to show Volpone as self-destructive by any other than partly trumped-up motives.

Objections to the fifth act of the play as forced rather than natural were first expressed by Dryden in 1668 and expanded by the dramatist Richard Cumberland in 1788; Jonson himself also reveals doubts in his dedicatory Epistle. Yet modern criticism has so far attacked these views to the point where Jonas A. Barish can claim:

The inquest opened by Dryden into the structural peculiarities of Act V would seem to be closed; few today would dispute Swinburne's and Herford's verdict, that Volpone's compulsive resumption of his hoaxing, far from being a desperate shift to galvanize a flagging plot, forms one of the master strokes of the action.

The word "compulsive" is the key to most current opinion of what drives Volpone forwards: it is said that he is incapable of rest and is driven on to his end by poisoned creative exuberance which has grown throughout the play. No one, however, seems to have considered that while this may partly be true, it would better be brought home to us if Volpone had not been portrayed as he is in Act V, scene i, where he expresses his fears at the degree to which he has already overreached himself. Nor has it been remarked that he could have saved himself even after going further and that, to this extent, the "dull devil" which he berates in himself continues long after its supposed dismissal-in-recognition. Moreover, there is disparity in the fact that V. ii, the first scene in the play which Volpone rather than Mosca arranges, reverses the earlier dichotomy of Volpone exerting power while static and Mosca while in motion.

Jonson could not, as we have seen, let Volpone get away with it in this play because he has, at least in the first scene, and in much of the imagery, subjected him to moral analysis. However, as he wrote he came to admire his own creation to the extent that he could not find it in him to give the creation fully adequate motives answering to the governing notion of evil being self-detonating.

Source: C. N. Manlove, "The Double View in *Volpone*," in SEL: *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, 1979, Vol. 19, pp. 239-52.

Critical Essay #4

In this essay, Cohen discusses the significance and detail of the setting of Volpone.

Theseus' observation that poets give "to airy nothing a local habitation and a name" is nowhere more confirmed than in the works of Ben Jonson. To his great plays Jonson has given local habitation a hundred names and made the sense of locale in those plays almost tangible. His plays are filled with scenes that go beyond an attempt to suggest a place and try instead to re-create it in all specifics. Where Shakespeare would supply a setting with a few bold impressionistic strokes, Jonson etches in every detail with Hogarthian thoroughness. Jonson first toyed with a precisely imagined setting in *Every Man out of His Humour* in 1599, but he did not approach setting consistently until he wrote *Volpone* in 1606. From that time on, Jonson takes pains to locate his comedies in a strict geography. The deliberate setting of *Volpone* functions as symbol, as theme, and as a principle of unity and dramatic tension; it suggests the extent to which setting is structural, not ornamental, in Jonson's great plays.

Jonson's choice for *Volpone* of an Italian specifically, a Venetian setting contributes to what C. H. Herford describes as a "lurid atmosphere." In the eyes of Jonson's English audience, Italy "represented the very acme of beauty and culture, of licence and corruption." And of all Italian cities, Venice, as Herford points out, "stood in the front rank for this sinister repute," so that "to make the Fox a Venetian grandee was thus to give him and his story the best chance of being at once piquant and plausible."

To the Englishman, Venice was the most fabulous of wealthy Italian cities; it was a place where houses were "worthily deserved to be called, Pallaces, some hundred of them being fit to receive Princes...." Venice was a city famed for its jealous husbands and closely kept wives on the one hand, and for its courtesans and brothels on the other. Thomas Coryat marvels that such "places of evacuation" were necessary "for the gentlemen do even coope up their wives always within the walles of their houses ... as much as if there were no Cortezans at all in the City." The reputation of Venice for licentiousness was matched by its reputation for harsh justice, and the *Catastrophe* of *Volpone* reflects not only Jonson's own strenuous morality but also the fame of a Venetian punishment "sufficiently severe and righteous to frustrate ... the villainy its society presumably tolerated."

This reputation of Venice for vice, opulence, jealousy, and cruelty made Jonson's choice of it as the setting for Volpone not simply a sound one, but the *sine qua non* of the action, the characters, and even the language of the play. Little wonder that when Jonson published his *Works* ten years later he used *Volpone* as it stood and did not transfer it to London as he did his other important play with an Italian setting, *Every Man in His Humour.* But Jonson was not the first English dramatist to appreciate the aptness of Venice as a setting for a play about greed and harsh judgment. What separates the Venice of Volpone from the Venice of Shylock is Jonson's detailed depiction of that setting.

Jonson clearly establishes the Venetian setting of *Volpone* and preserves that setting consistently throughout. Unlike the Florentine setting of the first *Every Man In* (Quarto), for example, the Venice of *Volpone* does not grow transparent and reveal, as the play progresses, a thinly disguised London beneath an Italian setting. Unlike the *Insula Fortunata* of *Every Man* Out, the Gargaphy of *Cynthia's Revels,* or the Rome of *Poetaster,* the Venice of *Volpone* is not meant as an allegorical London. Nor has Jonson created, as he did in Poetaster, a setting which, though true to the Italian model, is carefully drawn to resemble London. Venice is simply the best setting possible for the play, and throughout *Volpone* Jonson's steady execution of that setting shows he knew its value.

The care with which Jonson draws the Venetian setting of *Volpone* anticipates the accuracy and technique of his finest London comedies, and this despite the fact that Jonson never visited Venice. Jonson's diligence appears in the references to currency, in allusions to literature and politics, in the language, and in the imagined topography of the play. Twelve kinds of coin are named in *Volpone,* more than in any other of Jonson's plays, and his use of six denominations of Venetian currency testifies to his careful research. Nowhere does an errant reference to English money spoil the consistency of the setting.

Jonson shows the same care with respect to works of literature. In the Milan of The Case Is Altered, Jonson alludes at length to the English stage. In the Florence of *Every Man In* (Quarto), the fops steal poetry from Heywood and Marlowe and pay homage to Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. Despite their settings of Gargaphy and Rome, *Cynthia's Revels* and *Poetaster*, respectively, are extended references to the literary society of London and are designed as salvos in the *Poetomachia.* Only *Volpone* of all Jonson's non-English comedies is innocent of displaced allusions to English letters.

Even the allusions to public figures and history show Jonson's eagerness to give *Volpone* an accurate Italian setting. Volpone, as Scoto, searching for a simile to express his rejuvenated appetite, tells Celia he is "as fresh / As hot, as high ..." as when he acted Antinous for "the great Valoys" (III. vii. 157-162). The reference is to a 1574 reception for Henry of Valois, the Duke of Anjou, given by the Doge and senators of Venice a reference perfectly apt for a Venetian in 1606 who is recalling his youth.

The most obvious way in which Jonson has matched the language of *Volpone* with its Venetian setting is the occasional Italian term with which he has seasoned the speech of the play's characters. Italian vocabulary that finds its way into this English play includes: *sforzati,* "gallie-slaves"; *scartoccios,* "a coffin of paper for spice"; canaglia, *"raskalitie*, base people, the skum of the earth"; *gondole; saffi,* "a catchpole, or sergeant"; *clarissimo,* a grandee; *strappado,* a Venetian torture; and *Pomagnia*, a popular wine in Venice. Jonson's attention to these Italian touches as well as his care in such details as literary references and coinage contributes bit by bit to the exotic and foreign atmosphere of the play as a whole.

But the language of *Volpone* heeds the location of the play in a more important way: only the two tragedies avoid the tones and rhythms of everyday London speech more

carefully than *Volpone.* From the elegance and blasphemy of Volpone's hymn to his riches "Good morning to the day, and next my gold" Jonson maintains a heightened verse in keeping with the reputation of Venice for the perversely exotic. Nowhere in the play is there a trace of the lower-class colloquial English found in every Jonson comedy from *A Tale of a Tub* to *The Magnetic Lady.* Although the London travelers Peregrine, Sir Politic and Lady Would-be provide some relief from the sumptuousness of the play's language and emphasize its foreignness, even they do not speak in the English of the London streets.

Indeed the English subplot is itself a clever device for separating the Venetian setting from London. First, the very presence on the scene of two "affectate travellers" is a constant reminder that London is not the setting of the play. Second, the harmless English folly of the Sir Politic Would-bes acts as a foil to the vicious Italian knavery of the other characters and thus enhances the menacing Venetian atmosphere. And third, by channeling all topical English allusions into the Would-be scenes, Jonson can flavor his play with topical comedy without compromising his setting. Act Two, scene one, for example, in which Sir Politic enlightens Peregrine on the subject of international intrigue while Peregrine reports the news from home, is a veritable gazette of current London news and gossip, but in the context of two Englishmen meeting abroad the whole scene serves to emphasize the Venetian setting.

The most impressive aspect of London's thoroughness in creating his Venetian setting is his handling of place itself. There are forty-four topographical allusions to Venice in *Volpone.* Altogether, including Venice, thirteen different places are mentioned. Venice is referred to sixteen times, St. Mark's Cathedral eight times, the Piazza of St. Mark's five times, the *scrutineo* or court four times, the port twice, and eight other locations once each. By contrast, in *The Merchant of Venice,* though Shakespeare refers to Venice seventeen times, the only other place name he mentions is the Rialto. These numbers confirm the importance of setting to the playwright; since Jonson had never been in Venice, such allusions cannot be the echo of actual experience but are rather a conscious effort to provide an accurate and thorough background. This nearly documentary approach to dramaturgy appears to have been fundamental to Jonson's larger purpose the making of a unified play.

The Prologue declares, "The lawes of time, place, persons he observeth" (1. 31), and, in fact, Jonson strictly enforces the unities of time and place. By setting all of *Volpone* in Venice, Jonson easily fits the action into a single day, a feat he had already managed in *Every Man In, Cynthia's Revels,* and *Poetaster. Volpone,* however, represents a significant development in Jonson's technique, not because the action of a day is limited to one city, but because the action is confined to a certain part of a city. In this play Jonson begins the technique he never abandons of focusing his comedies within the sharp outlines of a narrow and well-conceived section of a city. Jonson squeezes the action of *Volpone* into the Piazza of St. Mark's and its surrounding buildings.

The text specifically locates all the scenes except Sir Politic Would-be's quarters and Volpone's house itself. Ten of the play's scenes take place in the Piazza of St. Mark's, which Sir Politic calls "this height of Venice." Three more the three at Corvino's house

take place in "an obscure nooke of the piazza" for which it is likely that Jonson envisioned no movement at all, but intended that the scenes be played on the upper stage, while the main stage continues to represent the piazza. Nine scenes are set in the *scrutineo* or senate house that makes up one side of the Piazetta adjacent to the main *piazza.* Thus Jonson sets twenty-two of *Volpone's* thirty-nine scenes in the most renowned section of Venice, the magnificent Piazza of St. Mark's and its adjoining Piazetta. Of the seventeen unlocated pieces in the puzzle, one is Sir Politic's house, for which there simply is no evidence, and sixteen are Volpone's house. Having so scrupulously conceived the other parts of the setting, Jonson would hardly have been indifferent to the location of Volpone's house in his imaginary Venice. The care, moreover, with which Jonson has placed the majority of the scenes around the center of Venice strongly suggests that he envisioned all of the play within a narrow scope of the city, namely in close proximity to the *piazza.*

Such a conjecture finds support in Volpone's taunt to Voltore in V. ii:

I meane to be a sutor to your worship,

For the small tenement, out of reparations;

That, at the end of your long row of houses,

By the *piscaria*: it was, in Volpone's time,

Your predecessor, ere he grew diseas'd,

A handsome, pretty, custom'd bawdy-house,

As any was in Venice (none disprais'd)

But fell with him; his body, and that house

Decay'd, together. (11. 7-15)

The phrases, "fell with him," and "his body, and that house / Decay'd, together," suggest that Volpone is talking about his own lodging, a place corresponding in both moral and physical terms with the nature of its master a decayed "bawdy-house." The *"piscaria"* in Venice was on the wharf along the south side of the *piazza*. In light of the configuration of the other settings and in view of this reference to Volpone's "long row of houses, / By the *piscaria,*" Jonson apparently envisioned all of the action, including that at Volpone's house, in the area of St. Mark's Piazza.

The question is "why?" Later, Jonson's extraordinary care in limiting and locating the settings of his London comedies might have given his audience a good deal of fun, but the audiences who saw *Volpone* would not even realize, much less enjoy, Jonson's precision with the Venetian setting. I would like to suggest that the limited and detailed setting first used in *Volpone* and thereafter in *every* Jonson comedy worked as a principle of construction for the author. It provided him with a framework that resulted in

the tensions, the atmosphere, and the unity that have come to be associated with Jonson's great work. Beyond whatever sense of "being there" his deliberateness gave the audience, the careful setting unifies and heightens the action, enhances the symbolism of the spatial relationships on and off the stage, and lends meaning to the play.

For the playwright, the cumulative effect of the many concretely imagined details of the *piazza* in *Volpone* is that of a container which unifies the action simply by keeping its different parts in the same place. Madeleine Doran has rightly pointed out that unity of place is not an end in itself but a way of insuring unity of action. Because the scope of the setting is limited, Sir Politic can break off his conversation with Peregrine to watch Volpone perform nearby as the mount-bank; Mosca, leaving Corvino's house, can meet accidentally with Bonario; Lady Would-be, leaving Volpone's house to apprehend her husband, can find him in the piazza with Peregrine; and so on. Thus the limited imaginary setting helps Jonson hold the various actions together. Working from this premise, Jonson can give the audience a sense of concentration that leads in turn to a heightened excitement, because the container, which confines Jonson's action so closely that the characters must frequently meet one another, raises the audience's expectation of collision.

By extending the principle of movement within an imaginary container to the action on the stage the visible container Jonson achieves the intense expectation of collision which is the essence of the excitement in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist.* In both plays, Jonson creates excitement by a theatrical application of Boyle's Law he puts more and more characters into a chamber in quicker and quicker succession, and thereby increases the probability of collision and the exhilaration of each near miss. In *Volpone,* Mosca's deft shuffling of the dupes in and out of Volpone's house generates tension until they collide at the end of Act Three, while in *The Alchemist* the three rogues prolong and aggravate the tension until Act Five. The excitement in both the London play and the Venetian play is a function of Jonson's carefully concentrated setting both on the stage and in the narrowly conceived section of the city beyond.

His precisely delineated setting helps Jonson establish the symbolic significance of the spatial relationships on stage. As simple a relationship as "high" and "low," for example, acquires a rich complexity. In the mountebank scene the stage is divided into three levels: the stage floor, the platform on which Volpone speaks, and Corvino's balcony. Sir Politic, Peregrine, and the "flock" stand on the first; Volpone as Scoto of Mantua, on the second; and Corvino's wife, Celia, on the third. Their positioning on stage is a visual comment on each. The mob, fooled by Volpone's disguise, represents the fox's victims and is, therefore, on the bottom; Volpone, a Venetian grandee who preys on the greedy but is unable to corrupt the virtuous, is situated above the crowd but below Celia, who, as befits her name, is placed nearest heaven and out of the reach of Volpone. Logically, Corvino, who is in the house, should be above to discover Celia at the window, and his extreme jealousy would erupt there on the spot. But since the appearance of such a despicable character on the highest level with the innocent Celia would destroy the careful symbolism of the spatial relationships, Jonson has preserved his high-low

scheme by having the enraged Corvino appear on the stage floor level to chase Volpone/ Scoto away.

Jonson also uses the "in" and "out" spatial relationship on stage for its symbolic impact. Volpone's house, particularly his room the inner sanctum is the goal of all the scoundrels and, therefore, the play's symbolic "in." When Mosca betrays Volpone in V. v, he expresses his triumph in terms of in and out: "My Foxe / Is out on his hole, and, ere he shall re-enter, / I'le make him languish, in his borrow'd case ..." (11. 6-8). Though being "in" the fox hole after the fox is gone is the ambition of all the dupes, the metaphor cuts the other way as well, for Volpone's room is, above all, a trap. Corvino, Voltore, Corbaccio, and Lady Would-be are all caught in that "Foxe-trap," but the scene that most vividly expresses the negative sense of "in" as entrapment is III. vii, where Celia, dragged into Volpone's room by her husband, is caught by the Fox and pleads, "If you have touch of holy saints, or heaven, / Do me the grace, to let me scape" (11.243-244).

Jonson establishes an over-all opposition of place within the play. Volpone leaves the safety of his lair to prey on the innocent Celia and his subsequent assault on her brings in the opposite moral pole the scrutineo. Through Mosca's brilliant manipulation, he and his master escape the Venetian justices and return to Volpone's inner sanctum. Act Five finds Volpone secure and ready to bring his plans to fruition, but Volpone's desire to torment his victims makes him leave his house in Mosca's hands and the tricky servant springs the "foxe-trap." From this point on, the action is determined by the play's second magnetic field the scrutineo where all the scoundrels are punished and the play ends. Thus the fifth act repeats in miniature the movement of the play by restating the struggle between Volpone's house pleasure, falsehood, and lawlessness and the scrutineo severity, truth, and law. At the opening of the act, Volpone and Mosca are in control of events in the fox's lair; then Volpone's arrogance moves the action to the piazza, away from the safety of his house; and finally the forces of law represented by the avocatori take control of the action, resolve the complications, and punish the evildoers.

The often-remarked severity of the play's conclusion voices Jonson's own response to the meaning of the play's setting. Venice was renowned in the English mind for its excesses in wealth, in beauty, in corruption. That atmosphere of excess exaggerates familiar domestic faults: it transforms jealousy into the viciousness of Corvino; turns the misunderstanding between father and son into the bitter enmity of Corbaccio and Bonario; materializes the dreams of a voluptuary into Volpone's attempted rape of Celia; surpasses a charlatan's promises with Volpone's actual wealth; transmutes the folly of English "gulls" into the frightening avarice of the carrion birds Corvino, Corbaccio, and Voltore; and inflates the pranks of clever servants and the con games of rogues into the crimes of Mosca and Volpone. These excesses were rooted in the English concept of Venice, and Jonson responded to them by using yet another reputation of Venice its harsh justice to punish its sins.

Volpone might fairly be viewed as a turning point in Jonson's work for the public stage. In *Volpone* he treats setting with a deliberateness which is surprising in view of his earlier comedies but which signals his approach to place in the masterpieces that follow *Epicoene, The Alchemist,* the revised *Every Man In*, and *Bartholomew Fair.* The Venice

of *Volpone* is much more than appropriate ornamentation for Jonson's play. Although, like Shakespeare, he chose Venice because his audience associated that city with wealth, corruption, viciousness, and judicial severity, Jonson drew Venice with an unparalleled accuracy and detail. His remarkable care in such matters as references to coins, history, and literature, and his obvious research into Venetian topography bespeak a purpose in his methodical madness. Through these efforts, he provides the imagined world of the play with a fixed and detailed setting and with a narrowly limited field of action. Jonson's best comedies share these two characteristics in their settings and reflect their benefits. Primarily, such a setting provides Jonson's plays wtih a sense of concentration. It can accelerate the movement of characters from place to place an effect he exploits in *Epicoene*. It can increase the plausibility of a chance meeting and raise the expectation of collision, thus heightening the excitement of the play a device most dramatically demonstrated in The Alchemist. Perhaps most important, the tightly drawn setting accounts for what T. S. Eliot calls Jonson's "unity of inspiration" his ability to "do without a plot" by holding the various actions so tightly together that they appear intertwined a technique fundamental to the coherence of *Bartholomew Fair*. Jonson's handling of setting in *Volpone* is a departure from his earlier work, a departure that corresponds with and in part explains the beginning of his greatest period.

Source: Ralph A. Cohen, "The Setting of *Volpone,*" in *Renaissance Papers,* 1978, pp. 64-75.

Critical Essay #5

In this essay, Liu shows the relationship between the seemingly incongruous themes in the play, which many criticize "for its seemingly irrelevant subplot, fool interludes, and mount-bank scene, as well as for the near-tragic tone of its denouement."

Ben Jonson's *Volpone* has for centuries been acclaimed a masterpiece; yet it has been condemned for as long a time for its seemingly irrelevant subplot, fool interludes, and mountebank scene, as well as for the near-tragic tone of its denouement. With these charges against it, the play has nevertheless won such admiration and respect as to suggest that there is much in it to be appreciated which, though overlooked by the critics, must be implicit in its performance.

In 1953 Jonas A. Barish took the first step toward finding a connection between the main plot and the subplot by identifying their respective protagonists as Volpone and Sir Politique Would-bee, justifying their relationship through the theme of disorder. Although his interpretation opens up possibilities for greater appreciation of the play, the so-called discordant parts remain so for the most part, and the analogy between Volpone and the knight seems forced, since there is little parallel in the play's action to support the relationship.

A more meaningful analogy may be found by contrasting Would-be with Volpone's would-be heirs. Peregrine exploits the knight's desire to appear sophisticated and knowing in the subplot, just as Volpone exploits his clients' desire for his gold in the main plot; each is the "center attractive" of his own plot. In both cases it is their victims' blindness which makes their exploitation possible. In their victims' blindness we find the unifying theme for the play: self-deception. Through this theme the subplot may be seen to mirror the main plot; the would-be sophisticate operates in a world of folly, while the would-be heirs operate in a world of vice.

Jonson, by this theme, strikes at a universal human characteristic, as perverse as it is persistent, to believe what flatters our hopes at the expense of denying truth. It is a tendency as timeless and ubiquitous as Oedipus' refusal to believe Tiresias in ancient Thebes, or as Willy Loman's denial of his own truth in contemporary Brooklyn.

We are offered numerous variations on this theme, revealing how all men fall victim to self-deception when they are tempted sufficiently to hope for impossible goals. In every case in the play, except for Lady Would-be, the handmaiden of self-deception is flattery; thus the flattery of others, whether open or subtle, causes each to flatter himself into faith in false hopes. Not only simpletons like the Would-bes succumb, but crafty fortune hunters as well as brilliant manipulators like Volpone and Mosca yield to this deceptive self-flattery.

The knight and his lady are clearly self-deceived in their desire to appear worldly. Volpone's suitors, too, willfully blind themselves to the truth because they want so desperately to win his fortune, although they see clearly enough when they choose.

Each has a moment of doubt which is instantly set aside at Mosca's equivocal reassurances. None seriously questions how Volpone could be dying for so long a time, or that Mosca is the exclusive "creature " of each to the exclusion of all the others.

Unlike the Would-bes, Volpone and Mosca are neither simple-minded nor merely crafty and blinded by false hope. Their great success lies in their self-knowledge; Volpone glories in being an old fox and Mosca takes pride in being a parasite. Neither is flattered by the professions of love and concern by Volpone's clients. Mosca is clearly never deceived by them; he, further, makes it his business to expose each suitor to his master (except for Lady Would-be, who, as a result, Volpone later reveals he believes loves him). Yet eventually Volpone and Mosca also deceive themselves, revealing the all-pervasive power of self-deception more emphatically; mocking the blindness of their victims these clever deceivers succumb to that same malady.

From the earliest moments in the play Volpone reveals a predilection for flattery, foreshadowing his ultimate capitulation to it. It is generally assumed that Volpone's downfall begins when he supposedly "overreaches" himself by feigning death, but it really begins in the first scene of the play, when we find him boasting that he earns his gold in "no common way." Mosca slyly converts his master's claim into a moral statement through flattery:

But your sweet nature doth abhorre these courses;

You lothe, the widdowes, or the orphans teares

Should wash your pauements; or their pittious cryes

Ring in your roofes; and beate the aire, for vengeance. (I.i.48 51)

The unsuspecting Volpone melts in agreement: "Right MOSCA, I doe lothe it." Shortly each of these claims will be violated: Celia's tears shall wash his floor, and Corvino's betrayal shall make her plight as pitiable as any widow's, while Bonario, financially orphaned by Mosca's plot, shall soon cry out for vengeance.

Mosca goes on to flatter his master's generosity, and Volpone, enchanted with Mosca's vision of him as a generous patron, reciprocates with a gift. In spite of being realistic about his clients Volpone is as malleable as they when he is flattered. It is significant that we see Mosca flatter Volpone before he flatters the fortune hunters. Jonson meant us to see the parallel, which differs only in timing; Volpone's descent into self-deception is gradual, while the clients' is an accomplished fact from their first moments on the stage.

Volpone begins to hope for the impossible once he decides to win Celia through Mosca's efforts. Helena Baum considers his passion "heroic," and few commentators have observed that it is misguided and doomed to failure. Yet Volpone's passion is precisely what Jonson derides in him; a successful old fox with clients who cooperate in deceiving themselves, Volpone is out of his depth as a lover. Celia, unlike the clients, is singularly unimpressed by his flattery and has no desire to join him in the sports of love.

His refusal to recognize this, after their first few moments alone, makes his lyrical outpourings ridiculous and self-deceptive. And when Celia promises to "report, and thinke" him virtuous if he will only release her, he reveals a new, unrealistic interest in appearances that had not interfered with his dealings with his clients:

Thinke me cold,

Frosen, and impotent, and so report me?

That I had NESTOR'S *hernia,* thou wouldst thinke. (III.vii.260-62)

He has altered his motive: he now wants only to prove his manhood. His sudden degeneration from wooing in Catullus' vein to raping in Tarquin's becomes highly comic. Celia's terror, however, contrapuntally played against this changing mood from lover to rapist, makes the scene one of the high points of satire in the play, for it reveals self-deception in a more serious light. Indeed Volpone's short-lived career as a lover is singularly ill-starred; he is beaten by Corvino, shunned by Celia, and ignominiously discovered by Bonario. It is not accidental, surely, that Volpone dons the costume of a mountebank to play the lover.

Not only does Volpone fail to win Celia, but his seeming victory at court, won at the cost of his being publicly declared impotent, is Pyrrhic for a man who has begun to fancy himself a lover. We see him, indeed, in "dislike" with his disguise for the first time, and it is his dislike for the price he has to pay, I believe, that leads him to abort his lucrative venture by giving out that he is dead. He has been undone in appearances just as he has begun to believe in them.

Like his master, Mosca also falls victim to flattery, but he is somewhat more realistic. He flatters himself at his great success with Corvino, which leads him to boast that he is superior to all other parasites (IILi. 13-22); yet each quality he scorns in ordinary parasites is evident in himself. Mosca also begins to deny reality, as he joins the ranks of the Would-bes. Taking pride in being able to assume any shape, he is later deceived into believing that he may don the costume of a grandee and thereby be one in reality. He forgets that he is only a parasite, dependent on his patron, forgets, too, that his most potent weapon with his master is flattery. Once he becomes blunt, Volpone, no longer blinded, exposes their venture to Mosca's surprise, whose cynical view of mankind has not taken into account the fact that men need not act like animals, although the would-be's of the play do. Mosca thus deceives himself when he overestimates his own ability and underestimates his master's.

The play reveals exceptions, those who do not deceive themselves because they are never tempted into unrealistic hopes. In the main plot these are Volpone's fools, who tell of their metamorphoses from Apollo in a steady downward process of degeneration but, ironically, never into self-deception. All the would-be's desire to be other than themselves, but the fools willingly remain fools. Their deformities are visible, hence undeniable; appearance and reality are united in their physical deformity, affording ironic contrast to the moral and spiritual deformity of the main characters.

The deformed trio of the main plot are fools by profession and entertain Volpone; in the subplot Peregrine pretends to be a fool with Sir Politic to entertain himself. At first glance it would seem that Barish's thesis was supported by a certain correspondence here between Volpone and the knight, but in it lies another of the play' s ironies. Those who act as fools are only such in appearance; those they serve are the true fools in their self-deception. Volpone in his would-beism is like Sir Politic, but in his disabused exploitation of his clients he remains the counterpart of Peregrine.

Long ago the exchange between Volpone and Mosca in V.ii. 18-27 was pointed out, by William Gifford, as the best "defence of the plot of the Drama." In it Volpone tries to understand his suitors' blindness, and Mosca, the shrewd psychologist, points out:

True, they will not see't.

Too much light blinds 'hem, I thinke.

Each of 'hem

Is so possest, and stuft with his owne hopes,

That any thing, vnto the contrary,

Neuer so true, or neuer so apparent,

Neuer so palpable, they will resist it

Hope blinds each would-be to the truth. And something has prevented the critics who pause to comment on this passage from seeing its wider application, not simply to the fortune hunters, but to all the major characters of both plots, except Peregrine and the fools.

To recognize self-deception as the unifying theme can be to comprehend the importance of the mountebank scene in ILii, which has often been criticized for its length, or indulgently tolerated for its color. It is a key scene in the play structurally as well as thematically. In it Volpone steps out of his role as fox to take on the role of lover, i.e. to become seriously involved in self-deception. The preceding scenes have been devoted mainly to exposition introducing the world of gold-worship in Li, the ironically ideal world of the fools in I.ii, Volpone's suitors in I.iii to I.v, the subplot, the world of folly, in II.i. The mountebank scene opens the action proper. Volpone is smitten by Celia's beauty; Mosca sets out to win her for him; from this scene forward Volpone resigns his role as chief manipulator to Mosca, reclaiming it partially when he decides to revenge himself on his clients by pretending to be dead, but not fully regaining it until his final confession.

Self-deception speaks in the imagery of the scene: Scoto's oil, a metaphor for flattery, makes it possible. The oil is dispensed by Mosca to gull the clients and his patron; by Peregrine to Sir Pol, in the oblique form of feigned innocence, which flatters the knight into a conviction of omnipotence; by Voltore to smooth his way with the Avocatori. In II.vi

Mosca cynically tells Corvino that Scoto's oil has restored his dying master, which we may take as a way of saying that Volpone has flattered himself into believing that flattery (and gold) may win the love of Celia. As for the powder Scoto offers her, the magic powder of cosmetics is the means whereby women deceive themselves. Later in the play the flattery of the Aesopian raven by the fox is applied to the would-be heirs as Volpone taunts his suitors in his guise as commandadore.

The correspondence between the two plots develops in the play's ensuing action, which is propelled by accusations and counter-accusations which are similar in nature and outcome, although different in regard to veracity. Volpone is accused of attempted rape while Peregrine is accused of attempted seduction of Sir Politic. Both charges are dropped at the Lady's intervention under Mosca's direction, and apologies are thereupon made to those accused: the court apologizes to Volpone and the Lady apologizes to Peregrine. New charges are then made: Celia and Bonario are accused of being a team of prostitute and pander, and Peregrine makes the same charge against the English couple. The difference in seriousness of the charges is in keeping with the worlds of vice and folly which the plots reflect.

The two actions are linked, further, in Sir Politic's imagined plots, which find their counterpart in the real plots of the main action. Whereas he imagines plots exist everywhere, the would-be heirs ignore the real plots which flourish all about them; each is blind to the schemes of the others against him as well as to the Fox's plot against them all. The protagonists of both actions revenge themselves by mortifying their victims through their faith in false plots: Volpone uses the fortune-hunters' faith in his own plot, which is based on the belief that he is a dying man, to pretend that he is dead; Peregrine exploits the knight's faith in intrigues to pretend that he has been accused of intriguing against Venice. Volpone, in disguise as a court officer, humiliates his victims, while Peregrine, in disguise as a merchant, parallels Volpone by making the knight crawl literally. Finally, both protagonists show by example that deception need not lead to self-deception, for each strips himself of his own disguise.

Linking both actions is the role of Lady Would-be, who acts as a catalyst, but does not fully belong to either action. She is a would-be heir, like the other clients, and a would-be sophisticate like her husband, yet she is different from the others in that she affords no pleasure to Volpone or Peregrine, both of whom enjoy "milking" their other victims. Further, while everyone else is named for what he really is, her title indicates only what *should* ibe, an English gentlewoman the role in which everyone in the main action sees her. Her uninhibited freedom in a society which restricts its women shocks Volpone, Mosca, and even Nano, who sits in judgment on no one else in the play. (It is of course ironic that Volpone and Mosca should sanctimoniously deplore her behavior just as they are about to arrange for Celia's seduction.) Peregrine, however, is totally unimpressed by the Lady's title. She is different from all the others, moreover, in being the only character who is chastised in both actions, and the only one of the would-be heirs who is not punished in court. Jonson's purpose in setting her apart from the others would seem to be to make the point that even a fool may become vicious in a vicious environment.

Another of Jonson' s purposes in using the Lady to span both actions may be found in examining Mosca's role, which also encompasses both actions, for his hand guides her; he is thus responsible for a tonal change in both through the Lady's intervention. In the main action he is responsible for the most bitingly satiric scenes: Corvino's offering Celia, Volpone's subsequent attempt at seducing her, and the first court scene. In the subplot, too, he is responsible for the farcical tone established by the Lady's accusation of Peregrine. Hence Mosca's intervention on Volpone's behalf from the mountebank scene when he takes the reins, with the Lady as his assistant, may be seen as a third line of action which sits astride and commands the worlds of vice and folly. He is thereby responsible for the sombre tone which has struck the notice of so many commentators.

Through the third line of action Mosca becomes the third protagonist and we find another variation on the theme of self-deception. A clever young Englishman manipulates a would-be sophisticate to entertain himself and the consequences are comic and benign; a Venetian voluptuary manipulates would-be fortune-hunters for gold and the consequences are still comic but less benign, yet not altogether to be condemned; a Machiavellian manipulates whomever he can out of contempt for mankind and the consequences may be deadly and tragic; such consequences are averted only because the Machiavellian is himself trapped in self-deception and thereby overreaches himself.

Another link between the worlds of vice and folly may be found in Sir Politic's schemes, which function on two levels; on the surface they are comic, and for this reason have been virtually ignored by commentators. Barish, however, notes that the onion scheme has ironic value as a reminder of the "moral plague prevailing in Venice," and all three schemes indeed serve to mock self-deceivers who are plagued by lies they cannot distinguish from truth. The knight plans to sell red herrings to Venice if his two "mayne" projects fail. From its use in the text the term "red herring" would seem to have meant for Jonson what it is commonly understood to mean today, that is, a false scent, an attempt to divert attention from the issue at hand. Sir Politic offers his schemes at a crucial point in the play, in the first scene of Act IV. Immediately thereafter we are deluged by red herrings in false accusations which carry equal weight with the truth. Thus, if Sir Politic's schemes fail, Venice will stand in need of red herrings, which he will furnish at a profit. The schemes aim at making deception visibly and olfactorily foul to warn those incapable of reason. The tinder box scheme attempts to make arsenals safe from sparks; arsenals are a metaphor for man's potential for vice and folly which may be easily ignited by tinder boxes Volpone's feigned illness and Peregrine's feigned *naivete.* Onions, in the second scheme, are to make victims of the plague (perpetrators of deception) visibly recognizable. It is of course quintessentially ironic that the greatest fool of the play should be the only one to attempt to cure the moral plague of Venice. It is his myopic attempt, moreover, which informs the play's denouement.

If the theme of self-deception is actually the key to the play, as I have suggested, it should be supported in the play's denouement, and so it is, but in a perverse way that is peculiarly Jonson's own. Jonson puts a "snaffle" in the mouths of his critics, showing why vice *cannot* be punished in his "interludes" it would not truly "instruct to life" as he in

the "office of a comic poet" is obliged to do. Self-deception is wilful blindness; it can only be cured by the victim himself. In V.iii Mosca exposes each of the clients in unequivocal terms. Volpone subsequently rubs salt in their wounds, mocking them for having been so easily deceived. Voltore, indeed, confesses to the court once he thinks all is lost. Yet the moment when they learn Volpone still lives they are ready to deceive themselves all over again. In Sir Politic's method, then, lies the only solution: rotten eggs and stinking fish must be thrown at deceivers (V.xii.139^12) and preventa-tive methods must be used to protect men's arsenals. Each of the clients (who served as tinder to the court) is stripped of the role in which he deceived the court. Mosca is to be prevented from deceiving in "the habit of a gentleman of Venice" (V.xii.110-112), and Volpone shall never again feign illness, for he will be *made* ill and infirm in prison. None is punished for his crime: if men's arsenals of evil and folly are in danger of ignition then tinder boxes must be carefully watched.

Through the theme of self-deception we can see that Ben Jonson blotted his lines in *Volpone* most carefully. The play is admirably complex and it seems miraculous that he wrote it in but five weeks. Much injustice has been done him by those who were too quick to condemn what they did not fully understand. However, whether in a reading or in performance few have failed to recognize that the play is a masterpiece. If the theme of self-deception as applied here is new in critical terms, it has always been implicitly understood by audiences. They laugh at the clients' attempts to outwit the fox, the knight's attempts at *savoir-faire*, the mountebank's attempt to be a lover, recognizing that self-deception is the height of human folly.

Source: Dorothy E. Litt, "Unity of Theme in *Volpone,*" in *Bulletin of the New York Public Library,* 1969, Vol. 73, pp. 218-226.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Davison argues that although Jonson was inspired by the ancient Greek comodies, his interpretation of them was incorrect.

Although Jonson called *Volpone* "quick *comoedie*, refined," this description has not satisfied critics puzzled by the precise nature of the play. Edward B. Partridge, in his illuminating study of Jonson's major comedies, remarks that confusion as to the nature of *Volpone* suggests that "Jonson either failed to create anything aesthetically pleasing or created a drama too complex in nature and unique in effect to be encompassed by the traditional categories." A play "which creates such a profound sense of evil ... seems closer to tragedy than comedy," he states, and he refers to T. S. Eliot's dictum that, although "Jonson's type of personality 'found its relief in something falling under the category of burlesque or farce,' these terms are manifestly inadequate" for the unique world of *Volpone.* Although satire "may be the least unsatisfactory term" for the play, it better describes Jonson's method than "the aesthetic result."

Partridge is chiefly concerned with imagery in his study of *Volpone,* and he believes (correctly, I feel) that such a study, although it helps to "reveal the tone of the play," cannot entirely clear up the "confusion about the kind of drama that *Volpone* is." Herford and Simpson speak of *Volpone* as approaching Jonson's "own grandiose and terrible tragedy of two years before," *Sejanus.* T. S. Eliot has pointed out that "No theory of humours could account for Jonson's best plays," and he adds that *Volpone* and Mosca are not humors. More recently Northrop Frye has suggested that *Volpone* "is exceptional in being a kind of comic imitation of a tragedy, with the point of Volpone's hybris carefully marked."

Volpone is a comedy: but a special kind of comedy, the ultimate source of which is to be found in the Old Comedy of Greece.

Jonson was well acquainted with the comedies of Aristophanes, and attention has been drawn to this by Herford and Simpson, among others. They point to the use made of *Plutus* and *The Wasps* in *The Staple of News* and speak of Jonson as nowhere being "less Elizabethan than in the Aristophanic allegory of the *Poetaster* or *The Staple of News"*; however, they do not feel that Jonson approaches "the poetic splendour of *The Birds* or *The Clouds* ...." It is to these two plays by Aristophanes that Herford and Simpson believe we must ascribe, in *Cynthia's Revels, '* 'both the frank use of mythic or fantastic incident against the canon of Jonsonian realism, and the admission of serious and beautiful lyric poetry (as in Echo's Song) contrary to the rigour of the comic spirit."

Though it is clear that Jonson was familiar with the comedies of Aristophanes, so far as I am aware his dependence upon Aristophanes has generally been thought to have been restricted to the use of such "mythic or fantastic incident," lyric "contrary to the rigour of the comic spirit," an admiration for the tartness of Aristophanes, and, in general, to "the salt in the old comoedy":

AVT. Ha! If all the salt in the old *comedy*

Should be so censur'd, or the sharper wit

Of the bold *satyre,* termed scolding rage,

What age could then compare with those, for buffons?

What should be sayd of ARISTOPHANES? (*Poetaster,* To the Reader)

We also know that Jonson was acquainted with the Old Comedy by the reference to it by Cordatus when he states that *Everyman Out of His Humour* is "somewhat like *Vetus Comoedia."* Precisely what is meant here by Old Comedy is not certain. Thus Herford and Simpson, while stating their interpassage as necessarily meaning Greek and Roman comedy (as opposed to old comedy in the native English tradition), also record O. J. Campbell's view that Jonson here meant "the Greek comedy which culminated in the work of Aristophanes."

That Jonson misunderstood Aristotle's view of comedy is well known. He quotes Aristotle as saying, "the moving of laughter is a fault in Comedie, a kind of turpitude, that depraves some part of a mans nature without a disease," whereas, as Herford and Simpson point out in their note on this passage, Aristotle stated that "comedy is an imitation of characters of a lower type." In view of the serious, and to some, the quasi-tragic nature of *Volpone,* Jonson's interpretation of the ancients is significant. Thus his repetition from Heinsius in *Discoveries* of the statement that "The parts of a Comedie are the same with a *Tragedie*, and the end is partly the same. For, they both delight, and teach," suggests a view of the structure of comedy which accords with the argument below, in which the hybris of tragedy is equated with the *alazoneia* of Aristophanic comedy, giving in *Volpone* the appearance of the hubristic hero wreaking his own downfall. The greater "seriousness" of *Volpone* as compared with Aristophanic comedy is also explicable in the light of Jonson's view (in his reference to Aristophanes in *Discoveries*) that "jests that are true and naturall, seldome raise laughter, with the beast, the multitude. They love nothing, that is right, and proper. The farther it runs from reason, or possibility with them, the better it is." Here, indeed, we have a theoretical basis for what Herford and Simpson describe as "the frank use of mythic and fantastic incident against the canon of Jonson's realism" in *Cynthia's Revels.*

In Volpone one has not only the general indebtedness to ancient comedy as Jonson understood it, and to Aristophanes in particular, but also the employment of the Aristophanic figures of alazon and *[bomolochos].* Pickard-Cambridge points out that

A considerable part of many plays of Aristophanes consists of scenes in which a person of absurd or extravagant pretensions is derided or made a fool of by a person who plays the buffoon scenes (to use the convenient Greek terms) between an *[alazon]* and a *[bomolochos]*

The *[alazon}* takes many forms, he states, but the *[bomolochos]* "generally takes one of two forms the old rustic and the jesting slave." In a footnote, he quotes from paragraph

6 of the *Tractatus Coislinianus: ["ethe komodias Ta Te bomolochia Kai Ta eironika Kai Ta Ton alazon on.]"*

This passage is also referred to by F. M. Cornford, who states that "Aristotle seems to have classified the characters in Comedy under three heads: The Buffoon *(bomolochos),* the Ironical type *(eiron),* and the Imposter *(alazon)."* However, he concludes that "in the Old Comedy, 'buffoonery' *(bomolochia)* is only the outer wear of 'Irony,'" and thus there is "over against the Imposter, one character only the Ironical Buffoon."

Although their precise functions have changed a little (for example, Pickard-Cambridge states that the *[bomolochos]* had "a particular function in the prologue that of stating the subject of the play, requesting the goodwill of the audience, and attracting their favour by some preliminary jesting"), it is this relationship which underlies *Volpone: [alazon]and [bomolochos]:* Impostor and Buffoon or perhaps more aptly, as Cornford suggests, Ironical Buffoon.

Northrop Frye argues for four types making two opposed pairs: "The contest of *eiron* and *alazon* forms the basis of the comic action, and the buffoon and the churl polarize the comic mood." This is not only theoretically accurate, but each type exists individually. However, they overlap and interchange frequently, and although churl and buffoon are appropriately paired, the pairing of *alazon* and *eiron* fails to take into account the buffoonery associated so often with the *eiron.* The distinction may, in part, be a social one Pickard-Cambridge's two forms of "old rustic and the jesting slave." Thus, Peregrine in *Volpone* may seem (at first) more aptly an *eiron* than a buffoon, whereas Volpone disguised as a mountebank plays the buffoon. However, Peregrine in V.iv. engages in buffoonery, and Volpone is a source of irony. Thus, so far as *Volpone* is concerned, I prefer to set one form the Ironical Buffoon against the Impostors.

In the main action, Volpone is the principal Impostor, his downfall being worked by Mosca when he changes his role from that of agent to antagonist. The lesser characters of the main action, the four legacy seekers Voltore, Corvino, and Corbaccio, and Lady Politic Would-Be are also Impostors.

In the action associated with Sir Politic Would-Be, he himself is an Impostor, and Peregrine is the Ironical Buffoon who exposes him, by verbal irony, as in Peregrine's comments upon Sir Politic's diary, and then in V.iv, when Peregrine frightens Sir Politic into making himself ridiculous in the tortoise shell, and thus completely disposes of him.

The similarity of this Impostor-Ironical Buffoon relationship in the actions associated with *Volpone* and Sir Politic is significant for two reasons, one dramatic and the other critical. Jonas A. Barish remarks in his study, "The Double Plot in *Volpone*": "For more than two centuries literary critics have been satisfied to dismiss the subplot of Volpone as irrelevant and discordant, because of its lack of overt connection with the main plot." In addition to mimicking their environment and thus performing "the function of burlesque traditional to comic subplots in English drama" (which is Barish's concern), there is also this use of Impostor and Ironical Buffoon, common to both plots, which further unifies

Volpone. Critically, the use of this concept in both actions tends to confirm that it was Old Comedy which was the source of Jonson's inspiration, for, although Volpone's character is complex, making less obvious the relationship with Old Comedy, in Sir Pol and Peregrine one has, very clearly indeed, the Impostor and Ironical Buffoon of Old Comedy.

There is also another association with Old Comedy in the use of animal names. Edward Partridge has pointed out that Volpone is not a beast fable cast in the form of classical comedy, for in *Volpone* "reasonable beings appear as lower animals with the instincts of lower animals." Jonson may well have had in mind the practice of Aristophanes as exemplified in The Wasps, The Birds, or The *Frogs.* As has already been mentioned, Jonson speaks in *Discoveries* of "the beast, the multitude."

It will be plain that Jonson, in his use of this relationship of Impostor and Ironical Buffoon, has not done so without adapting it. Though the lesser characters can be seen simply as Impostors, Mosca and Volpone are more complex, especially Volpone. Mosca, in his dual role of agent and antagonist, is both Plautine "managing servant" and Ironical Buffoon. Further, when at the opening of Act III he says," Successe hath made me wanton," we see the beginning of an action that will lead to Mosca overreaching himself in the manner of an Impostor seeing himself as the "fine, elegant rascall, that can rise, / And stoope (almost together) like an arrow." The imagery itself suggests the dual function.

Just as there are two aspects to Mosca's character, so there are two aspects to Volpone's. Volpone and Mosca combine to deflate the lesser Impostors in the main action, and, in this capacity, Volpone acts as Ironical Buffoon. The buffoonery is particularly apparent when, in his desire to participate in the action, he disguises himself as a mountebank (II.ii) and as a Commandadore in V.v to V.viii. The Ironical Buffoon aspect of Volpone's character is especially to be seen in V.vi to V.viii, where Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore are mocked. Corbaccio and Voltore specifically refer to their being mocked by this Commandadore in the sixth and seventh scenes of the act, and in V.vii, Volpone (still disguised), jeers at Corvino because he has "let the FOXE laugh at your emptinesse." More subtly, Volpone, as has been so clearly demonstrated by Edward Partridge, is the source of much of the play's irony, and in this the ironical aspect of the Ironical Buffoon is stressed. For example, in Li, in the perversion of religious imagery in praise of gold, an imagery which "at once creates and passes a judgment on Volpone's religion of gold" creates an "irony which is fundamental to the tone" of the whole play.

Thus, in so far as Volpone (with Mosca) brings about the down-fall of the lesser Impostors, Volpone appears as an Ironical Buffoon in speech and behavior. But this does not entirely explain either play or character, for it is only part of the whole, and it is for this reason that a study of the imagery, so largely ironical, cannot entirely clarify the confusion as to the kind of drama represented in *Volpone* (as Partridge has noted).

What must be taken into account is that, although Volpone is at one level the deflating Ironical Buffoon, he is primarily an Impostor, the most magnificent Impostor of them all.

He is so from first to last, but it is only in the fifth act, when he feigns death and his agent turns antagonist, that Impostor gains dominance over Ironical Buffoon.

It is significant that when, in IILvii, Volpone attempts to seduce Celia, we have a temporary change in the tone of the play. At this point, irony and buffoonery are absent. Volpone's imposture of the lover is unchecked. The result is melodramatic overstatement, rather than tragic, an impression most apparent in Bonario's lines when he comes to Celia's rescue: "Forebeare, foule rauisher, libidinous swine, / Free the forc'd lady, or thou dy'st, imposter." How apt is Bonario's calling Volpone "imposter"! The melodramatic nature of this scene illustrates the dramatic effect of a situation in which an Impostor is allowed free rein. It is only with the presence, actual or implied, of the Ironical Buffoon, that comedy can be effected in a play dependent upon this relationship.

Perhaps the most skillful employment of this technique of Old Comedy is the nature of Volpone' s *[alazoneia]* that which causes him to overreach himself. Volpone initiates his own destruction, becoming the victim of his own Ironical Buffoonery. In his pretense of death, he wins his final triumph over the four inheritance seekers (and, simultaneously, he acts the Buffoon as he watches in delight, "Behind the cortine, on a stoole"). But this final imposture, of death, is both the end of the Ironical Buffoon in Volpone and the cause of his downfall. This he himself realizes:

To make a snare, for mine owne necke! and run

My head into it, wilfully! with laughter!

When I had newly scap't, was free, and cleare!

Out of mere wantonnesse! (Volpone, V.xi.1-4)

Here we have the self-initiated fall, the Ironical Buffoonery ("with laughter"), the overreaching.

Some of the excess of Aristophanic comedy, the savageness of the satire, the farce, and the burlesque, is to be found in *Volpone,* but, in Jonson, one has a greater concern for moral issues than in Aristophanes. As Partridge suggests, "a critic willing to do some violence to the play" might see *Volpone* "as a prophetic vision of the society which capitalism, even in Jonson's day, was creating." It requires even greater violence to a play by Aristophanes to say something akin to this even though in *Lysistrata,* for instance, one might perceive the undertones of war. Though Jonson adapts what he takes from the Old Comedy and is more concerned with serious issues, one can see how essential the Old Comedy relationship of Impostor and Ironical Buffoon is to the play: it is this relationship that makes clear the nature of the drama of *Volpone. Volpone* is comedy, but close in tone and certain aspects of its technique to Old Comedy, the comedy of Aristophanes. As Jonson said in his address to the two universities, he had written Volpone

though not without some lines of example, drawne euen in the ancients themselues, the goings out of whose comcedies are not alwaies ioyfull, but oft-times, the bawdes, the seruants, the riuals, yea, and the masters are mulcted: and fitly, it being the office of a comick-Poet, *to imitate iustice, and instruct to life, as well as puritie of language, or stirre vp gentle affections.*

Source: P. H. Davison, *"Volpone* and the Old Comedy," in *Modern Language Quarterly,* 1963, Vol. 24, pp. 151-157.

Adaptations

Industrial Cinematografica produced a Spanish version of *Volpone,* entitled *Tiburon,* in 1933. The film is distributed through Empressa (USA).

lie de France Films produced a version of *Volpone* in 1940. The film has been distributed through A. Z. Distribution in France.

United Artists produced a version of *Volpone*, entitled *The Honey Pot,* in 1967.

Topics for Further Study

The setting for *Volpone* is Venice, which the English considered a center of sinful vices. Thus, Jonson felt very comfortable using this city as a setting for a story about greed. Shakespeare also used Venice as a setting for several of his plays, including *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello.* What was Venice really like in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Was it a center of sinful vices, as these playwrights depicted?

Sir and Lady Politic Would-be represent the out-of-place English tourist, who are pretentious and too loud, much the way American tourists are regarded in the twentieth century. Research the role of the tourist during the seventeenth century. How accurate is Jonson's depiction of the English knight and his wife?

Spying was an important element in early seventeenth century life. There was a lot of spying going on in the courts of both Elizabeth I and James I, and so, this was a common motif in plays of this period. Sir Politic Would-be represents this motif, as he is very concerned with spying, which allows Peregrine to finally best him. Investigate the spying that occurred in court and how it might have influenced other elements of English society.

Eventually Jonson turned to writing masques, which were much more popular with audiences than his plays, especially at court. But masques were more expensive to produce than plays, and ultimately, the exorbitant cost indirectly led to the English Revolution and the beheading of Charles I. While Jonson did not cause the English Revolution, the king's constant taxing of his subjects to pay for masques, did play a huge role in Cromwell's victory. Research the history of the masque and its staging and the role the masque played in the beheading of Charles I in 1649.

Compare and Contrast

1605: The Gunpowder Plot is discovered. This is a plot to blow up the House of Parliament. The plot is attributed to Roman Catholics; and the English, who worry a great deal about the Catholic Pope's influence in their country, are reminded of the danger that Catholics and the Italian Pope present.

Today: Terrorism is still a part of British life, with random bombings remaining a principle means of the Irish Republican Army's method of warfare.

1605: Tobacco, a late sixteenth century export to England, was the recent subject of a pamphlet published by James I, in which the king referred to the habit as dirty and unhealthy. He will change his mind in 1612, when the Virginia tobacco trade adds significant wealth to his coffers. The desire for wealth easily eclipses honor and duty.

Today: Tobacco continues to be a subject of much controversy. While the United States government pursues settlements with tobacco companies, the government collects huge revenues in taxes on tobacco, which it uses to subsidize tobacco growers.

1605: The forests of England have been severely diminished for several years, and imports of wood continue to escalate in price, thus contributing to inflation and economic hardship and to peasant unrest.

Today: The queen has been under increasing pressure to reduce her expenses and the cost of maintaining the royal presence. In response, she has agreed to pay taxes and to cover many of the expenses previously paid through taxation of the public.

1605: The plague continues to kill many in England, although the death toll is not as severe as two years earlier. A significant contributor to the reoccurrence of plague is the crowding and poverty of London, caused in large part by the forcing of peasants from the country and into the city.

Today: The plague still continues to threaten lives, but in smaller number. A more significant plague is to be found in HIV infections, which in spite of promising treatments, continues to infect many new victims each year.

1605: The English continue their exploration of the Americas, with the voyage of explorer George Waymouth, who lands off the coast of North America, an area he will call Nanticut.

Today: After nearly three hundred years of colonization, the English no longer seek to discover and colonize new lands, and are more focused on solving the social problems of their own country.

What Do I Read Next?

Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist,* written in 1610, is another play that uses the farce or the con game as a plot device. In this case, a servant takes advantage of his master's absence to swindle a succession of people with the promise of turning base metals to gold.

Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale" is another parable about greed. As he did elsewhere in his Canterbury Tales, written c. 1387, Chaucer uses an old man's greed and lust to reveal people's vulnerability.

Twelfth Night, by William Shakespeare, was first presented in 1600. Although the plot is not about a swindle, it does involve the use of disguise and trickery to bring about order and resolution. Since Shakespeare was a contemporary of Jonson's, his comedies provide a useful contrast to Jonson's.

The Merchant of Venice, also by Shakespeare, was first presented in 1596. This play likewise involves disguise and deceit, but it is interesting because the ending creates many questions about the definition of comedy. A complete moral resolution is missing, but in the case of this Shakespearean play, the plot raises many complicated questions about prejudice and honesty.

The Art of Renaissance Venice, published in 1993, is a study of the art of Venice. Author Norbert Huse incorporates architecture, sculpture, and painting into one volume containing more than 300 illustrations.

Art and Life in Renaissance Venice, is a 1997 text that attempts to recreate Venice during the Renaissance. In this text, Patricia Fortini Brown tries to answer reader's questions about how the people lived and why Venetian art differs from that of the rest of Italy.

Further Study

Ford, Boris, ed., *Seventeenth-Century Britain*, Vol. 4, *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain,* (Series), Cambridge, 1989.

This book provides an easy way to understand the history of England in the seventeenth century. The book is divided into separate sections on literature, art, and music. An introductory section provides a historical context.

Herford, C. H., Percy Simpson and Evelyn Simpson, eds., *Ben Jonson*, Oxford, 1925-1952.

This eleven-volume work includes a biography of Jonson and introductions to each of the plays. This text of the plays is a reprint of the 1616 folio that Jonson printed. There is also some information about the public's reception of the plays and a great deal of information dealing with almost any aspect of Jonson's life or work.

Hill, Christopher, T*he Century of Revolution* 1603-1714, Norton, 1961.

Hill is a well-known author of books which examine the cultural and historical background of English Renaissance literature. Hill has provided an well-organized examination of the economic, religious, and political issues of the seventeenth century. The events that led up to the English Revolution, the Revolution, and the Restoration that followed were crucial incidents that shaped the literature of this period and that which followed.

Hirsh, James E., ed., *New Perspectives on Ben Jonson,* Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997.

Hirsh has compiled a collection of essays on Jonson's work that reveals many of the current scholarly approaches to examining Jonson's texts.

Kay, David W., *Ben Jonson: A Literary Life,* St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Kay has provided a concise biography of Jonson's life, which also explores the influences of Jonson's early life, his presence at court, and his relationships with other Renaissance playwrights.

Maclean, Hugh, ed., *Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets,* Norton, 1974.

This text provides a good selection of Jonson's poetry. Because a selection of the poetry of Jonson's contemporaries is also included, Maclean offers readers an easy way to study and compare the poetry of the period.

Sanders, Julie, ed., Refashioning *Ben Johnson: Gender Politics and the Jonsonian Canon,* St. Martin's Press, 1998.

This text contains a collection of essays by scholars in an examination of Jonson's work within their historical and political context.

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Bate, Jonathan, "The Elizabethans in Italy," in *Travel and Drama in Shakespeare's Time,* edited by Jean-Pierre Maquerlot, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Cohen, Ralph A., "The Setting of *Volpone,*" in *Renaissance Papers,* 1978, pp. 64-75.

McPherson, David C., *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myth of Venice*, University of Delaware Press, 1990.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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