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VOLPONE OR THE FOX

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Ben Jonson

BEN JONSON

Volpone or The Fox

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First Edition 1979

Reprinted 1989

MACMILLAN INDIA LIMITED

Madras Jaipur Patna Vapi

Bangalore Bhopal Coimbatore Cuttack

Guwahati Hyderabad Lucknow Trivandrum

Associated companies throughout the world

SBN 033391 234 9

Published by

S. G. Wasani for Macmillan India Limited and Printed by
V. N. Rao at Macmillan India Press, Madras 600 041

PREFACE

This edition of *VOLPONE* is intended for students of Indian Universities specializing in English literature at the post-graduate as well as the under-graduate level. Realizing the difficulties that Indian students are likely to confront in the study of an Elizabethan dramatist of almost formidable erudition, the editor has taken special care to explain words and passages normally left unexplained in Western editions. The critical analysis and the comments on various passages in the *Notes*, it is hoped, will enable the students to understand and appreciate the play and to develop a curiosity about Ben Jonson who is one of the few great Elizabethans with a distinctly modern appeal.

The editor is grateful to The Macmillan Company of India Limited for bringing out this edition.

Trivandrum
15-8-1978.

M. G. NAYAR.

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INTRODUCTION

I. Biographical Note

Benjamin Jonson was born in London in 1572 as the son of a clergyman, a few weeks after the death of his father. Two years later his mother married a brick-layer who 'brought him up poorly.' He was sent to Westminster school where he came under the influence of the famous antiquary and scholar, William Camden, of whom Jonson spoke later in glowing terms as the man to whom he 'owed all that I am in arts, all that I know.' He could not afford to go to Oxford or Cambridge after his early education at Westminster owing to his poverty and for a time was forced to pursue his step-father's profession which was naturally uncongenial to a boy with a scholarly bent of mind and literary ambitions.

Much of Jonson's early life until the production of his first play *Every Man In His Humour* (1598) is steeped in obscurity. Giving up his step-father's profession, he joined the expedition to Flanders where he was credited with having challenged and killed an enemy in single combat—perhaps the earliest trace of the pugnacity of temper that brought him into many a bitter conflict with literary rivals and earned for him the reputation of being an envious and aggressive man—an image that has passed down to posterity, subsequently tarnished century after century by systematic denigration by generations of enthusiastic Shakespeare-worshippers who seem to have thought it their pious duty to the Bard of Avon to speak of his most illustrious contemporary in pejorative terms, making invidious comparisons and disregarding the intrinsic value of his solid achievements as a dramatist.

After his return from Flanders he married a woman by name Anne Lewis. Perhaps it was to support his family that he first turned his attention to the stage as an actor in a company of strolling players. Soon he became associated

with Henslowe's company, first as an actor and later as playwright. Tradition has it that as an actor he was quite unimpressive, and as a collaborator, his very first work—*The Isle of Dogs* (1597), an unfinished play by Thomas Nashe which he was called upon to complete—brought him into trouble with the authorities as it was officially condemned as 'seditious and scandalous'. Jonson was imprisoned with two others of whom one was Gabriel Spencer. Soon after his release in 1598 he wrote *Every Man In His Humour*—the first of his 'humour' comedies that brought him into the very centre of theatrical activity after his rather desultory association with the drama of the day. It made him popular because of its realism and the characters drawn from the London *milieu* familiar to his audiences. It was in this play that Jonson declared his didactic aim as a dramatist and exposed the follies of his age rendering them ludicrous in his 'humours' who were made to embody the excessive manifestations of these follies and foibles. The satiric mood of the dramatist was quite evident in this play, but it was in his next 'humour' comedy that it became more pronounced.

Soon after the production of his first celebrated play, Jonson again became involved in a bitter quarrel with Gabriel Spencer whom he killed in a duel. During the imprisonment that followed, he was converted to Roman Catholicism, and escaped the gallows by benefit of clergy. However, all his goods were confiscated and he was branded on the thumb.

The year 1599 saw the production of *Every Man Out Of His Humour*. Here again the characters are similar to those of his first comedy, but the satiric mood is deeper. His next two comedies *Cynthia's Revels* (1600) and *The Poetaster* (1601) were also satirical; while the former was a mixture of myth and masque and satire on Court life, the latter was an attack on his literary rivals, chiefly directed against Marston and Dekker. His first tragedy, *Sejanus*, appeared in 1603, but this play with all its elaborate classical setting, was too scholarly for the popular taste and met with a hostile reception.

The accession of James I to the English throne marked the beginning of an era of lavish Court entertainment. The masque with all its splendour of costume and spectacular scenic settings supervised by the celebrated Inigo Jones was the favourite entertainment of royalty, and Jonson rose to prominence as a writer of masques. The years that followed were the happiest in Jonson's life with the advantage of royal patronage and fame equal to that of a poet laureate, though the title as such was not conferred upon him. Those were also the most fruitful years in Jonson's life, for during this period were produced his great comedies—*Volpone* (1605 or 6), *The Silent Woman* (1609) and *The Alchemist* (1610). *The Silent Woman* was the most farcical of these, dealing as it does with the pranks played on Morose, a rich man allergic to noise tricked into marrying a dumb girl who in the end proves to be a demon of loquacity—a boy in disguise. Both the other plays had greed as their theme, the victims of avarice being imposed upon by the systematic knavery of audacious tricksters. *Volpone* is the darkest of his comedies while *The Alchemist* is the neatest and the best. *Catiline* (1611), the only tragedy of this period, was a failure.

On the comedies of Jonson's last period, critical opinion is divided. Of these *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) enjoyed great popularity by dint of its realism and a certain Dickensian portrayal of character that have invariably appealed to the popular imagination. The others—*The Devil Is An Ass* (1623), *The Staple of News* (1625), *The New Inn* (1629), *The Magnetic Lady* (1632) and *The Tale of a Tub* (1633)—are often referred to as Jonson's 'dotages', though they are not entirely devoid of merit.

In 1616 Jonson had his plays printed in folio and published as his 'Works.' An age that tended to view only writings of a serious philosophical nature as 'Works' must have considered it a presumptuous act of audacity, but Jonson had a lofty conception of the dignity of dramatic literature which he was determined to hold up at any cost. Besides comedies

Jonson wrote much poetry and criticism but most of it perished in a fire that destroyed his library in 1623. However, a considerable body of his critical opinions has been preserved in *Timber* or *Discoveries*.

Like his eighteenth century namesake, Jonson went on a tour of Scotland. It was during this tour that he happened to stay as the guest of Drummond of Hawthornden, and the record of their *Conversations* is a source of information about Jonson, some of the derogatory remarks later made by the host tending to perpetuate that unflattering image of the dramatist which has been built up by a century of romantic criticism.

With the death of James I Jonson's pre-eminence at Court came to an end, though he continued to receive his pension. Charles was not so well disposed to the dramatist as his father, but Jonson, in spite of sickness and neglect, continued his literary efforts, though he did not succeed again in producing anything as outstanding as the comedies of the Jacobean era. He died in 1637 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, the funeral being attended by all the literary and social *elite* of the day, though no memorial was erected for him. However, 'the sons of Ben' brought out an impressive volume of memorial verses and subsequently someone had the famous epitaph 'O Rare Ben Jonson' inscribed over his neglected tomb.

In his own day Ben Jonson occupied an eminent place beside Shakespeare; his vast erudition, his brilliant critical acumen, his sturdy common sense and his lofty conception of the dignity of literature had drawn towards him a host of admirers who came to be known as 'the tribe (sons) of Ben', of whom Suckling and Herrick are perhaps the best known. The vigorous wit combats at the *Mermaid* in which, according to Fuller, Jonson, 'the solid but slow Spanish galleon', encountered Shakespeare, 'the lesser in bulk but lighter English man-of-war,' had won universal acclaim for him as one of 'the choice and master spirits of the age' equal or even

superior to Shakespeare, and his renown remained unaffected throughout the seventeenth century. During the eighteenth century his plays continued to be acted and appreciated, but the glory had already dimmed and shone fitfully until it suffered an eclipse in the succeeding century. The romantic critics of the 19th century took him severely to task 'for the crime of not being Shakespeare'.* But with the twentieth century reaction against Victorianism, Ben Jonson has come into his own, a fresh critical sanity insisting that Shakespeare and Jonson be assigned to their appropriate peaks in Parnassus.

2. The Comedy of 'Humours'

* (1) The crudities of Elizabethan romantic drama revolted against Jonson's classical sensibility. A conscious artist and theorist, he was determined to purge contemporary drama of what he considered its fantastic absurdities—its improbabilities of plot and inconsistencies in character, its flagrant violation of the unities, its stress on make-believe and its concern with scenes and characters remote from reality—and to infuse into it a vital realism consisting in

Deeds and language, such as men do use,
And persons, such as comedy would choose,
When she would show an image of the times,
And sport with human follies, not with crimes.

* (Jonson thus aimed at subjecting drama to a rigorous discipline, investing it with realism in order 'to mix profit with pleasure.' To this end he brought the scene of comedy from remote Ruritanian regions to the London of his day and portrayed contemporary affectation and folly in characters drawn from the life he observed around him. The characters

*Jonas A. Barish, *Ben Jonson* (A Collection of Critical Essays), 1963, Prentice-Hall, Inc; New Jersey, p. 1 (Introduction)

with which Jonson peopled the world he created conformed to a theory based on the ancient concept of 'humours.' The method was partly Latin and partly medieval, for the characters of Latin comedy, as those of Plautus and Terence, were static types like the jealous husband and the stern father, the cunning servant and the obsequious parasite, and those of the English Moralities were allegorical figures—both types bearing a resemblance to Jonson's creations. Jonson adapted this conception of character to suit his dramatic purpose and reinforced it by the ancient physiological theory of 'humours,' according to which certain fluids in the body kept the human temperament in equilibrium—probably not unrelated to the hormonal balance of modern medical science. These fluids are the four 'humours,' blood, phlegm, choler and bile, corresponding to the four basic elements in the constitution of the human body—air (hot and moist), water (cold and moist), fire (hot and dry), and earth (cold and dry). An excess of any one of these humours in the human constitution would upset the balance of temperament, the predominance of phlegm producing a *phlegmatic* disposition, that of choler resulting in a *choleric* temperament, that of blood a *sanguine* and of bile a *melancholic* disposition. Besides these major imbalances arising from the excess of a single 'humour', numerous minor disturbances of temperamental equilibrium could result from the disproportionate mingling of 'humours' in various permutations and combinations, and these minor imbalances would manifest themselves in human behaviour as mild abnormalities, innocuous in themselves but ludicrous enough to call for corrective treatment, like affectations and follies, and these were Jonson's favourite targets of satire. Minor aberrations of this kind become acute obsessions in Jonson's creations like the inordinate jealousy of Kiteley, the excessive parental solicitude of Knowell and the boastfulness of Bobadill in *Every Man In His Humour*. All these characters display distortions of disposition attributable to the imbalance of 'humours' in their constitution,

In the induction to *Every Man Out Of His Humour*, Jonson himself defines a 'humour' in order to distinguish it from its vulgar connotation in contemporary parlance, which in modern English would only mean 'a whim':

As when some one peculiar quality
Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluxions, all to run one way,
This may truly be termed a humour.

(The 'humour' comedies of Jonson concerned themselves with these weaknesses, holding them up to ridicule. Sometimes a particular character may serve to expose the follies of others, but in the end he may himself be the butt of mockery) like Macilente whose envy is exposed in *Every Man Out Of His Humour*. To suit the dramatist's didactic purposes, these qualities are magnified to the comic proportions of idiosyncrasies or eccentricities as if reflected in a grossly distorting mirror.

(Jonson's contribution to comedy, therefore, consisted in realism and the creation of 'humour' characters treated satirically. In so far as satire and realism are concerned, he may be said to have set the pattern for the Comedy of Manners. But Jonson has been blamed for creating static types without any semblance of personality, devoid of the fascinating complexity that marks the characters of Shakespeare. It would, however, be an error of critical judgement to suppose they are mere puppets or lifeless creations.) Jonson's characters are simplified creations as those of Shaw, the simplification consisting, as T. S. Eliot puts it, 'largely in reduction of detail, in the seizing of aspects relevant to the relief of an emotional impulse which remains the same for that character, in making the character conform to a particular setting.*' The

* T. S. Eliot, in *Ben Jonson, A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by J. A. Barish, p. 22.

exclusion of details not immediately relevant to the dramatic purpose for which the characters are intended, is similar to but perhaps more rigorous than the pruning that every writer is obliged to make in the effort to focus attention on particular situations and actions in any novel or play. 'No English dramatist had yet attempted comedy on the basis of so severe an interpretation of its scope as a picture of follies and foibles,'* and naturally, Jonson's characters may not have a relevance detached from the dramatic environment in which he places them, unlike those of Shakespeare, but in the drama they come to life and live with an intense vitality that bestows upon the whole design that concentration of effect which the dramatist aims at. It was not Jonson's aim to create characters 'in the round,' and within the austere framework of the 'humours' he did achieve his purpose, bringing to bear upon it a sustained vigour of verse, a wealth of erudition and observation and the rigour of comic law insisted on by classical practice.

*(The scrupulous observance of the unities of time, place and action is typical of Jonson's comedies. The unities required that the action of a play should be a single one uncomplicated by any sub-plot or any material that is apt to distract attention, that the scene of action be the same throughout and the duration of the action represented on the stage be restricted to the length of a day. While adhering to these precepts, Jonson did not make a fetish of them,) for in *Sejanus*, a historical tragedy, he could not help violating the unity of time. (In *Volpone*, the unities of time and place are observed, but the action is complicated by a sub-plot.)

3. Volpone

Volpone is among the greatest comedies of the Jacobean period, that never failed to appeal to audiences whenever it

*G. N. Herford, *Ben Jonson*, p. xviii.

was staged—from its first performance in 1605 to its revivals in England and America in the twentieth century. Its concentration of effect, its simplicity of structure and its marvellous energy have always left an abiding impression on play-goers and readers alike.

✱ The play is a savage satire on human cupidity, vigorously worked out within the alien framework of the ancient Roman custom of *captatio*. (That one of the seven deadly sins is the target of Jonson's satire places the play in a category different from his 'humour' comedies, though greed is certainly the dominant 'humour' of the play.) That this satire on vice is based on an entirely un-English custom necessitated the shifting of the *mise en scene* from contemporary London to Venice so that the practice of offering gifts to a wealthy, childless old man on the brink of death with the ulterior motive of substantial returns by way of a legacy might sound credible to English audiences by the sheer remoteness of the scene of action. Though it was not a Venetian practice either, Venice with its reputation for fabulous affluence and luxurious vice was precisely the city that the Jacobean imagination would readily associate with the sordid world of *Volpone*.

✱ (The Jonsonian nomenclature typical of the characters of the 'humour' comedies is here exclusively associated with beasts and birds of prey, implying a certain dehumanization by greed) while it underscores the inhumanity of the characters as well as the moral deformity of the world they move in, its appropriateness is evidenced by the dissolution of the barrier between beastliness and humanity in the course of the play's action, for, 'as men they duplicate the habits of beasts; as beasts, they brutishly travesty humanity.'* (The names given to the misshapen inmates of *Volpone*'s household are also suggestive of their particular natural deformities: the dwarf is called Nano (suggesting smallness), the cunuch is

*Jonas A. Barish *The Double Plot in Venice*, Ibid, p 99

called Castrone (suggesting emasculation) and the hermaphrodite Androgyno (suggesting both masculine and female traits). 'Volpone' (the Fox) is suggestive of vulpine cunning and 'Mosca' (the flesh-fly) of parasitism. The legacy hunters are all named after birds of prey: 'Voltore' is associated with the vulture, 'Corbaccio' with the raven and 'Corvino' with the gor-crow. Metaphorically they are hovering over the Fox's den to swoop down upon his body as soon as he dies. The repeated references to the fable of the fox and the crow and the imagery of the play drawn largely from birds and beasts, monsters and fabulous creatures, disease and decay, keep us constantly reminded of the rottenness and inhumanity of the world they inhabit and the distorted values they cherish. Even Sir Politic's name is suggestive of the parrot whose prattle is mimicry, and both Sir Politic Would-be and his wife prattle and unwittingly, in their own clumsy way, mimic the fashionable vices they see in Venice, while the name 'Peregrine' is associated with the hawk and the traveller.

The squalid world of *Volpone* is a world deformed by disease and debased not merely by greed but by all the seven deadly sins, for, though greed is the main target of Jonson's satire, all the other vices are brought within its scope. Pride is seen in Volpone and Mosca, Sir Politic and Voltore, for they are all proud of some quality they possess, either real or imagined; while the arch-knaves pride themselves on their shrewdness and practical ingenuity—their over-confidence developed by consistent success proving itself disastrous in the long run—Voltore plumes himself on his skill in legal jugglery and Sir Politic on his absurd 'inventions.' Lechery manifests itself in Volpone's attempted seduction of Celia abetted and encouraged by Mosca and Corvino and also in the references to Aretine's pornographic poems; gluttony is implied in the voluptuous pleasures that Volpone dwells on with poetic fervour as he tries to entice Celia; envy is the natural concomitant of greed in all the legacy hunters and

wrath reveals itself in Corvino's frenzied outbursts of jealousy at the mountebank and his wife, while gloth is suggested by the parasitism of Mosca. It is as though the seven deadly sins were performing their *danse macabre* in a world denuded of all goodness, the leading role being assumed by greed.

✱ The intrigue initiated in the privacy of Volpone's 'sick-room' unleashing all the seven deadly sins, afflicts everyone who ventures into the fox's lair, until it engulfs the intriguers as well as their victims. Its intricate pattern is engineered by the inventive powers of Mosca. As Volpone takes in the legacy hunters by his audacious imposture, the birds of prey are assured by Mosea of their success in their plot; as they get themselves gulled they glory in the belief they are gulling. Indeed the zest displayed by the two knaves in scheming is infectious, everyone of their victims being 'possessed' by it; Voltore throws himself into the task of arraigning virtue with ferocious zeal; Lady Politic plays her part against Celia, even as Corvino does, with all the gusto of an amateur actor overdoing his part; once the scheme of Mosca has captured their imagination, Corvino as well as Corbaccio carries it out with singular zeal each insisting that the 'project is his own', revealing the way the gulls identify themselves with the very spirit of the knavery that baits them. The intrigue follows this pattern throughout the play, and the knaves themselves in the end get themselves trapped along with the gulls. Volpone and Mosca are victims of their own ingenuity; Voltore whose legal acumen is his forte is at last 'ridden by his own mulc,' as it were; Corvino whose terrible jealousy makes him treat his wife with needless severity is made to shed all his frenzy to become a self-confessed cuckold; Corbaccio who frames his will in Volpone's avour in the hope of getting his wealth doubled is deprived of his own. Every intriguer in the play including Sir Politic whose folly makes him imagine he is one, labours under the illusion that he is scheming successfully until he is caught in his own trap; comic justice works itself out in this

manner, and it is reinforced by the treatment meted out to all the legacy hunters by Mosca who mockingly reminds them of their culpable deeds of shame before they leave Volpone's house, frustrated and crestfallen.

* (Jonson's avowed aim in comedy was to laugh at contemporary follies while exposing them. But in *Volpone* he is not 'sporting with human follies' but with crimes. * The knaves as well as the gulls are all unpardonably wicked, driven by greed to stoop to any act of depravity; they suffer no qualms of conscience in delivering innocents as scapegoats into the hands of justice presided over by a veritable dunciad of a Venetian Judiciary. Blinded by their rapacity, they are morally deformed and they defy the very values they profess to uphold. Not one of them has any redeeming quality, whereas the two arch-knaves have at least the inventive power and zeal in scheming to redeem their wickedness which, nevertheless, is equally reprehensible. The enormity of their deeds issues from ingrafted vice and Jonson, dissatisfied with the comic justice meted out to them in the Fourth Act, subjects them to stern punishment in the Fifth. The penalty imposed on them is indeed out of tune with the spirit of comedy, but the moralist in Jonson could not be content to leave virtue in the lurch and vice triumphant at the end of Act IV, in spite of the insipidity of the two virtuous characters, especially in the face of the general outcry that 'we never punish vice in our interludes.'* The inadequacy of comic justice in dealing with crimes had therefore to be made up by deterrent punishment of vice. The bitter irony of the penalties imposed upon these monsters of iniquity, however, accords superbly with the sinister spirit of the whole play. But the fact that it is not the incompetent Venetian court that exposes their guilt but that it is Volpone's own confession that throws the noose around his own neck, makes

*See Jonson's Dedication, p. 5 below.

it conform partly to the pattern of comic justice already worked out.

It seems the dramatist, as he rode the crest of the wave of creative zest—it must be remembered that the play was the product of five weeks' labour, probably dashed off at white heat—became infected with the very zeal that drives his creation from one intrigue to another with astonishing audacity; the fascination that the creation exercised on the creator—similar to the spell that Falstaff cast on Shakespeare—carried him away, and the final scheme of Volpone's to spite his frustrated victims by feigning death is its crowning manifestation culminating in 'the uncasing of the Fox' as the only possible denouement.

(The two pure 'humour' characters in the play are the Would-be's, for their affectations constitute the folly that needs but the corrective of comic treatment.) While psittacine ★ garrulity is the folly that they have in common, they mimic in their own ways the vices of Venice—Sir Politic devoting his 'ingenuity' to scheming, providing a ludicrous but harmless parallel to Volpone, and his wife letting herself drawn into the exotic game of legacy hunting. Theirs is the harmless folly that, like the tortoise, draws itself back into its shell on corrective humiliation. The punishment inflicted on Sir Politic is at once a parallel and a foil to Volpone's: while Volpone is condemned to live with the incurables for feigning illness, Sir Politic is punished for feigning (ingenuity); Volpone suffers for actually scheming, whereas Sir Politic suffers for an imaginary scheme of which he has but prattled. The sub-plot involving Sir Politic and Peregrine has often been condemned as an excrescence and as a concession to 'humour' comedy in an otherwise sombre play and Jonson blamed for violating the unity of action. But the parallelism of the 'Politic plot' and the main plot (*see also Part 4*) makes it a burlesque in the true tradition of English comedy and the various points of contrast and contact between the two plots add 'a fresh dimension and a profounder insight without

which *Volpone*, though it might be a neater play, would also be a poorer and a thinner one.*

4. A Critical Analysis of *Volpone*.

ACT I

The opening lines set forth the perverted values of life that provide the pivot on which the whole plot revolves. While preparing us for the tortuous intrigues that are to follow, they also give us a foretaste of the nature of the satire that Jonson aims at—savage and cynical in its tone and intensity. The words of the two knaves conjure up a world of heartless exploitation carried on with single-minded devotion to Mammon; riches alone count here, the ordinary human values held sacred and dear by common mortals being set at nought with cynical contempt both by Volpone and his egregious parasite; gold, glorified as a deity, adored and enshrined with blasphemous zest, determines the pattern of values and conduct, its pursuit being the all-absorbing passion of the depraved denizens of this topsy-turvy world dominated by the Italian custom of *captatio*—a world of patrons and parasites, of legators and legatees, of knaves and gulls, of rank corruption and insatiable greed.

After the mock-liturgical hyperbolic invocation to gold, Volpone with almost macabre zeal passes on to the delights of his grotesque household. Volpone's self-imposed physical deformity is aptly paralleled by the natural deformity of the dwarf, the eunuch and the hermaphrodite. The halting rhythm of their speech suits these stunted specimens of humanity, and it contrasts sharply with the elevated style of Volpone's. While Volpone exploits his own feigned deformity and disease to acquire wealth, he delights in the grotesque performance of the naturally deformed: one sort of deformed

*Jonas A. Barish, *The Double Plot in Volpone*, Ibid., p. 105.

mity delighting in another. In addition to all this is the moral deformity of Volpone himself and Mosca and the legacy hunters engendered by their own ruthless greed. The distorted vision of these devotees of Mammon is luridly coloured by the beast fable and imagery drawn from animals and monsters.

The legacy hunters—Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino—come one after another, pay their homage, are reassured by Mosca of a handsome legacy and depart dazzled by dreams of El Dorado. Mosca's virtuosity in the art of gulling is brought out with admirable skill; while convincing each without raising the least trace of suspicion in any, that he and he alone is to be the Fox's sole heir, he persuades each that he is gulling while actually being gulled. The ingenuity with which he entices the senile Corbaccio into making his will in Volpone's favour and inveigles Corvino into shouting abuse into the supposedly deaf ears of Volpone suggests an Iago-like zest for intrigue as well as a mischievous intellectual range capable of infinite improvisations.

The basis for the two principal schemes from which the complications of the plot are to sprout is laid in this Act—the trapping of Corbaccio in an audacious plot and the rousing of Volpone's sensuality. The mention of Celia's loveliness is made casually but opportunely by Mosca as the two knaves gloat over their triumph after the departure of Corvino. Volpone in whom the lust for gold is almost indistinguishable from the lust for sex, is thus initiated into a fresh adventure involving further disguise that tickles the Protean instinct in him which he imaginatively unleashes in his rhapsody over Celia in Act III.

Act I presents a whole hierarchy of parasites. While the deformed dependants of Volpone's household represent the lowest class of parasites, Mosca who later prides himself on his inborn parasitic talents, is the cleverest being the architect of a series of iniquitous plots. Volpone who fleeces the would-be inheritors of his ill-gotten wealth by his valetudi-

narian imposture is himself a parasite as much as 'the contriver of all harms' while the repulsive legacy hunters driven by their ruling passion of greed are all in their different ways encircling Volpone with their parasitic tentacles, driving home the truth of what Mosca says later:

almost

All the wise world is little else, in nature,
But parasites or sub-parasites. (III, i, 11-13)

(As Volpone fools and fleeces by his monstrous imposture, Mosca provides delight by the comic irony of his words as he deals with each legacy hunter—pouring sarcasm on lawyers by derisive encomium on the profession, painting the very senility of Corbaccio by describing the imaginary decrepitude of his patron, prompting Corvino to abuse Volpone whom he has come to praise and insinuating a possible sharing of the 'gallant wife' of the jealous merchant who has suggested a conspiratorial partnership in wealth (giving a foretaste of the cuckoldry thrust upon him later). The way he tempts Corvino into insulting Volpone and his own vituperative vehemence in setting the example anticipate the tactics of the over-reacher who would fain abuse his patron to his very face could he but get the opportunity. Volpone who dupes his greedy 'clients' is gagged by his very imposture—caught, as it were, in his own trap as he is in a more disastrous sense at the close of the play—in the face of this sly mockery thundered into his ears by his own parasite.*

Among the unscrupulous pursuers of filthy lucre, Lady Politic Would-be is but a naïve contender, a bundle of vanities bent on making a display of her accomplishments and content to leave her game to be played by Mosca rather than throw herself into it like the others—an exotic bird that babbles without taking to the air to survey her prey.

*See note on Act V, 153

The hyperbolic tone of patron and parasite suggests an intensity of action and the verve with which Jonson's characters plunge into the activities of the moment—a zest that is underscored by their comic commentary that reminds us of the Chorus of the Greek plays, during the interval between the departure of one visitor and the arrival of the next.

ACT II

The second Act introduces the protagonist of the sub-plot—Sir Politic Would-be, a silly English aristocrat travelling abroad observing men, manners and cities. His pretentious, statesman-like airs, his pride in the 'engines' of his own invention and his claims to cleverness are a contrast to his hero-worship of mountebanks, which serves to bring out the essential fatuity of his mind. His constant dread of getting trapped in some sinister plot renders him all the more ludicrous.

The dialogue between Sir Politic and Peregrine affords the dramatist the opportunity to prepare the audience for the mountebank's performance that is to follow. As Mosca recedes into the background after having set the stage for 'the play within the play,' Volpone as the *saltimbanco*, Scotto of Mantua, comes to the centre of the stage—the Fox out of his lair for the first time. With characteristic zeal he plays the part of the mountebank, capturing the attention of the mob—among whom the idiotic knight can very well be imagined gaping at the 'great physician' and 'scholar' with a thrill of admiration—by a torrential eloquence that makes a marvellous display of the professional jargon of quacks—an instance of Jonson's powers of observation of similar performances in Bartholomew fair. The gross exaggerations of the mountebank are in tune with the hyperboles of the rest of the play. That Volpone should assume the guise of the mountebank has its irony of which the effect is essentially comic. It is as if the patient has suddenly turned physician;

while as bedridden invalid he has been supposed to be afflicted with all sorts of infirmities, anxious to be considered a physical wreck to dupe his victims and add to his possessions, as mountebank he cries up his spurious remedies for those very diseases, asserting the indispensability of health. Shifting from disguise to disguise, Volpone swings from one extreme to another: from the impotence of the invalid to the virility of the voluptuary, from the nobility of the magnifico to the baseness of the commandadore, from 'life' to 'death' and again from 'death' to 'life'; the 'uncasing' of the Fox in the last scene is of a piece with this pattern of comedy and parallels the 'shifts' of Corvino and Voltore.

Celia at the window enjoying the fun drops her handkerchief in response to the mountebank's appeal, and the morbidly jealous Corvino, arriving on the scene, takes Volpone severely to task. The Fox, beaten and weary, is compelled to retire to his den. Corvino then vents all his jealous fury upon his innocent wife whom he treats as if she were the inmate of a brothel; the mad jealousy of the merchant contrasts with the meek virtue of his wife. Here again, the hyperbolic language of Corvino reveals the zest with which Jonson's characters address themselves to the task in hand.

The Fox once again has been incapacitated by his disguise from retaliation—his very imposture imposing restraints, thus proving itself vulnerable at every turn. Once in his den, he seeks consolation in Mosca's appreciation of the excellence of his performance and he looks forward to the parasite's carrying out his promise that he will do everything within his power to fulfil his patron's desires.

Mosca then proceeds to Corvino's house and tells the merchant that Volpone who has had a wonderful recovery by the application of Scotto's oil needs further rejuvenation by a young woman as advised by an eminent physician consulted at great cost by Voltore and Corbaccio. The lie that he tells is itself an offshoot of another, and it shows his power to make capital out of airy nothings on the spur of the mo-

ment. He also warns the merchant that unless he makes haste, Voltore and Corbaccio who bought Scoto's oil and had the services of great physicians placed at Volpone's disposal, would steal a march on him. His next lie clinches the issue—that one of the physicians has already offered his own daughter. Corvino suggests that some whore would serve the purpose, but Mosca warns him against wily women who might take advantage of Volpone's dotage and dupe them all to deprive them of their legacy. Corvino is therefore advised to find some kinswoman whose implicit obedience could be taken for granted. The merchant's greed overcomes his jealousy, and he tells Mosca that he will offer his own wife. The parasite advises him to reach Volpone's residence only when he is sent for and takes leave of the merchant.

The sudden swing of Corvino from one extreme to the other—from being an incredibly jealous husband to one willing to countenance wifely infidelity—is paralleled in the play by equally abrupt changes of stance on the part of Mosca, Voltore and Volpone. The irony of these changes brought about by greed adds to the sharpness of the satire.

In Volpone the delight in possession seems to be overshadowed by the pleasure in the dispossession of others. His longing to have Celia as his mistress is genuine, but far more enjoyable to him is the anticipated thrill of cuckolding Corvino, especially because she is, for her husband, a possession 'kept as warily as is your gold.'

Volpone's all-absorbing passion for scheming is shared by Sir Politic who is at once a parallel and a contrast to the knaves. Volpone fearlessly carries out all his schemes while the silly knight can only talk about his grandiose but futile projects; the knight's pride in his imagined ingenuity is a foil to the knaves' in their practical efficiency, while the knight's constant dread of involvement in some intrigue is contrasted with the knaves' intrepidity. In his infatuation with his own projects Sir Politic offers a parallel to the schemer Volpone, and in boasting of them and of his having

been consulted by eminent persons on the subject of travelling abroad, he offers a parallel to the mountebank Volpone who expatiates on the high patronage of his drugs which are as fictitious as the 'engines' of his invention.

ACT III

The third Act opens with Mosca's soliloquy in the street in a mood of elation, flushed as he is with his recent success. He prides himself on being a rare parasite: he is not one of those who seek their patrons' favour to earn a precarious living, but one who can put his wits to better advantage. It is in this impish mood that he greets Corbaccio's son, Bonario, who spurns him with contempt. Ever intent on mischief aimed at establishing his superiority over his social and moral superiors, Mosca plays the humble virtuous man slandered by a cruel, malicious world to such perfection that the simple Bonario is easily taken in by the tears of injured innocence and in his melting mood, in spite of his instinctive misgivings, believes the parasite who now, with a vengeance, reveals the secret of Cobaccio's plan to bequeath all his wealth to his patron. To convince him of the truth, he takes Bonario to Volpone's house where he is asked to keep himself in hiding so that he can overhear every word his father utters.

As Volpone anxiously awaits Mosca's return, Lady Politic drops in to his annoyance. The long-winded lady's formidable loquacity is a torture he can hardly put up with in this hour of suspense. But soon, to his immense relief, Mosca comes to his rescue, and by a clever lie invented on the spur of the moment, he sends the lady flying in search of her 'erring husband' who, she is told, is flirting with 'the most cunning courtesan of Venice.'

The untimely arrival of Corvino with his wife—against Mosca's injunction that he should come only when sent for—complicates matters for Mosca. The jealous merchant has

rushed to Volpone's house lest he should be forestalled by the other legacy hunters. But Celia who is taken aback to learn the purpose of the visit resists; when Corvino's coaxings are of no avail, he threatens her with dire consequences and leaves her with Volpone.

Celia refuses to yield to Volpone's advances which take her by surprise. When Volpone seizes her, Bonario who has been evidently eavesdropping, rushes in and rescues the 'lamb' from the clutches of the 'Fox'. As he goes out with Celia, he encounters Mosca and wounds him. The two knaves in sheer embarrassment at the unexpected turn of events are faced with the prospect of disgraceful exposure, when Corbaccio arrives with the will. The stupid old man has carried out Mosca's instructions to the very letter. Corbaccio is apprised of his son's intransigence and the old man is now determined to disown his son. Mosca assures him of his services when they are surprised by Voltore who has overheard all the parasite's promises to Corbaccio. But the resourceful parasite by a fresh assurance of allegiance to Voltore allays all the lawyer's suspicions. Voltore is given a different version of Bonario's intervention, and the lawyer assures his patron of every legal assistance that he might require to prove his innocence.

Lady Politic acts as a connecting link between the two plots, albeit a weak one; she goes in and out of Volpone's world of wickedness, hoping for a legacy, perhaps willing or even eager to be seduced. The arrival of this lady just before Celia's is intended to contrast the woman of easy virtue with that of sterling worth. But as Lady Politic is held in disdain by the Fox—she is too plain to be dishonest—and as she makes no serious attempt to practise her wiles on Volpone knowing him as she does only as a physical wreck incapable of any passion, the contrast between the two is hardly striking. It is to seek the protagonist of the subplot that she hurries out on Mosca's report which is but a casual lie meant for the immediate purpose of ridding Volpone of the garrulous

nuisance; later, the lucky Mosca who discovers her railing at Peregrine imagining he is 'the most cunning courtesan of Venice' in male disguise, is able to make further use of that lie by telling her that the actual paramour of her husband is at the Court being tried for adultery, thus enlisting Lady Politic's help as a witness against the innocent Celia. At the Scrutineo the lady tenders evidence with such gusto that Celia is disgraced. It is Mosca's lie that deceives her into the belief that Peregrine is a whore in disguise; it is her agitation springing from this stupid conviction that makes her talk and behave in such a way as to arouse Peregrine's suspicion that she is soliciting with her 'scheming' husband's connivance. Mosca's lie thus gives rise to gross misunderstandings leading to the public confrontation in the street which is a sort of mock-parallel to the outrageous mockery of virtue perpetrated in the privacy of Volpone's 'sick-room' with the husband actually egging on the resisting wife to commit adultery. The vengeance that Peregrine vows to wreak on Sir Politic (carried out in V, ii) is thus connected to the exigencies of the plot engineered by Mosca against the innocents. These points of parallelism and contrast and contact between the two plots save the subplot from being entirely irrelevant to the main action.

Mosca's virtuosity leads him in an impish mood to mislead Bonario, and this gratuitous act of mischief recoils on him just as later a similar act of Volpone's done to spite the legacy-hunters spells the doom of both.

Bonario and Celia are both mere dolls of virtue, shadowy figures who seem to have stepped out of some Morality play. They fail to arouse interest or sympathy in spite of their virtue; it is the knaves in this play who are endowed with vitality (as is usual in Jonson's plays) as they pursue their intrigues with a zeal that makes them blind to everything outside their immediate sphere of activity. Nevertheless, Celia's heroic resistance to sin, in spite of her helplessness, brings in an element of pathos that verges almost on tragedy.

The values she upholds even in the face of disaster serve as a contrast to those of Volpone, and hers seems to be the solitary voice of sanity in a world maddened by avarice and sensuality.

The wooing of Celia by Volpone is in the extravagant vein of Elizabethan love poetry. Here again we see the hyperbolic intensity that characterizes Jonson's plays. Volpone expands, as it were, under the charm of Celia's loveliness and even bursts into song. His imagination runs riot and the lyrical outburst reveals his preoccupation with the romance of riches in the Marlowesque vein rather than any genuine passion. The poetical outburst is rather abrupt and untimely, but Jonson has been praised for its imaginative felicity and romantic lushness. But the exuberance of the verse here is incidental; its intention is to accentuate the incongruity between appearance and reality—the man who is to all the world a bed-ridden invalid incapable of passion abruptly turning into the passionate lover making amorous advances in the extravagant romantic vein of the voluptuary, dedicating all his ill-gotten wealth to Beauty in a moment of self-effacing rapture. Its spirit is comic and should be seen from the point of view of its embarrassing effect on Celia and should remind us of the grotesque delight that the deformed creatures provide for Volpone for here is deformity trying to break through its limitations with ridiculous results; before the deformed performers Volpone was the audience, but here he is the performer, as in the mountebank scene, and though the rhythm of his verse is not lame as that of his dependants, its effect on his 'audience' is.

ACT IV

After the hectic activities of the third Act which ends in violence and a temporary triumph for virtue, the Fox retreating in disgrace to the privacy of his den to lament the disaster, the fourth Act commences on a minor key with the

stupid knight expatiating on his 'politic' schemes to Peregrine. He dwells on his ingenious schemes to improve the economy of Venice, on his proposal to impose restrictions on the carrying of tinder boxes to guard against Venetian arsenals being set ablaze by disaffected delinquents and on the crowning glory of this ingenuity—a marvellous device worked by bellows and onions to detect plague in ships. Here is a 'mountebank' crying up his 'wares' to his 'audience'. The notebook wherein he has meticulously recorded the details of his daily activities from buying tooth-picks to urinating near St. Mark's serves to reveal what a rare coxcomb he is.

Lady Politic's furious interruption reminds us of Corvino's in the mountebank scene. Mistaking Peregrine for a whore in male disguise, she surprises him by the sheer violence of her language and strange behaviour. While she takes him for a woman in disguise corrupting her husband, he thinks she is soliciting with the connivance of her husband. (See the comments on Act III). It is again Mosca who puts an end to this public wrangling by telling her that 'the most cunning courtesan of Venice' is not Peregrine but a woman (Celia) who is being tried for adultery at the Scrutineo. The lady eagerly follows the parasite to the Scrutineo as Peregrine takes leave of Sir Politic vowing vengeance on the knight for this public humiliation.

At the Scrutineo the legacy hunters give evidence against the innocents and save Volpone from disgrace. The Fox is himself brought on a stretcher to the Court to elicit sympathy and exonerated, while Celia, condemned by Lady Politic as a whore is all but convicted along with her 'paramour', Bonario. Corbaccio publicly disowns his son and Corvino accuses his wife of adultery. The satire on greed becomes savage and ruthless in tone as vice scores a spectacular triumph over virtue, denouncing innocents, turning father against son, husband against wife and setting at nought all principles of judicial decorum—Lady Politic bearing false

witness against an innocent woman on whom she has never before set eyes, and Voltore rallying all his forensic skill to save the knaves.

ACT V

Volpone, drunk with success, longs for more. His thirst for gulling seems insatiable and he launches a new scheme to spite the legacy hunters—a fatal step that seals his doom. He has it announced that he is dead and Mosca is the heir. While Mosca in the splendid robes of a Venetian grandee busies himself making an inventory of all the precious articles he has 'inherited', Volpone hides himself behind a curtain and enjoys the discomfiture of the legacy hunters who drop in one by one and depart in despair as each is dismissed with the contempt he deserves by the parasite. Here, before the final verdict of the Venetian Court is pronounced, comic justice is meted out to the culprits.

Volpone, not content with all this mischief, determines to pursue them and tease them. Mosca provides the disguise—the uniform of a Venetian sergeant who is made drunk for the purpose. Disguised as a commandadore, Volpone dogs their heels and annoys them by teasingly reminding them of their great expectations.

Voltore in his frustration turns all his fury against Mosca when the Court reassembles in the evening to pronounce its final verdict on Bonario and Celia. He pretends to be conscience-stricken and declares that Celia and Bonario are blameless, imputing all the mischief to the machinations of Mosca. Corvino and Corbaccio are shocked and they attribute Voltore's recantation to 'possession'. Volpone who is himself present in the guise of the Venetian sergeant is as much taken aback as the avvocatori who, baffled at this sudden turn of events, at once send for the parasite.

It is Volpone himself who is sent to summon Mosca. The Fox still hopes that Mosca's testimony will set matters right.

But he experiences the shock of his life when he meets all his dependants in the street. He learns that they have been set free by Mosca and that he has taken the keys too. Volpone now realizes that the parasite is playing a deep game.

Returning to the Court, Volpone announces that the parasite will soon be there to tender evidence. He is still sanguine about Mosca's intentions and advises Voltore to tell the Court that, as reported by Mosca, Volpone is still alive, that the lawyer is still the Fox's favourite and all this is only a test of the lawyer's loyalty to Volpone. Voltore regrets his recantation and on Volpone's advice pretends to be 'possessed', falls down in a swoon and coming to himself after 'de-possession' declares that Volpone is alive and all that he has said during 'possession' should be ignored by the Court. The avvocatori are perplexed and they await Mosca's arrival to have this intricate knot undone.

When Mosca arrives, to Volpone's utter dismay, he maintains that his patron is dead. The avvocatori, impressed by the parasite's newly inherited wealth and position and dignified bearing, treat him with all the deference due to a Venetian magnifico. Volpone finds that the odds are heavily against him, with the corrupt court in sympathy with the upstart in whom one of the magistrates has already discovered a suitable match for his daughter. He realizes that Mosca has begun to cherish ambitions of social elevation and is not likely to respond to his appeal for assistance, for even the generous offer of half his wealth is spurned by the parasite. Mosca even takes exception to Volpone's reference to him as 'this creature', and the Court orders the insolent commandadore to be whipped for publicly insulting a noble man.

It now dawns on Volpone that the disgrace would be the same even if he were to confess the whole truth. With a vengeance he throws off his disguise and accuses all his erstwhile victims of having plotted against virtue, and the Court condemns them to condign punishment. Volpone is to be

dispossessed of all his wealth and confined to the institution for incurables until he becomes really crippled; Mosca is sentenced to slavery in the galleys; Voltore is debarred for ever from the society of lawyers; Corbaccio is to give away all his estate to Bonario and Corvino to be publicly paraded with ass's ears instead of 'horns'.

Jonson has been accused of having been too harsh in apportioning punishment to the guilty in the last scene, for the severity of the sentence is alien to the spirit of comedy. (See Part 3). If Jonson had stopped with the discomfiture of the legacy hunters, vice would have been left triumphant and Bonario and Celia would not have been vindicated.

The two characters in the play who need to be corrected for sheer folly are the Would-be's. While the lady is silenced and subdued by Mosca's effrontery, in the vengeance carried out by Peregrine, Sir Politic receives the treatment to which Jonson usually subjects his 'humour' characters. Peregrine plays upon the knight's constant dread of getting arrested, reminding him of having harboured a scheme to sell Venice to the Turks and drives him to seek shelter in the 'engine' of his own invention—a heavy tortoise shell. But he takes refuge in it only to find himself trapped, just as Volpone is caught in the noose of his own making. Peregrine's accomplices tread upon the shell, make him creep on all fours with the 'politic' shell on his back and force him out of it, the silly knight coming out the wiser for having gone in, for when he emerges from beneath the clumsy contraption, it is as though he were dragged out of the shell of his own folly, just as Volpone emerges a new man from his vulpine guise.

BEN JONSON

VOLPONE; OR, THE FOX

TO THE MOST NOBLE AND MOST EQUAL SISTERS,
THE TWO FAMOUS UNIVERSITIES,
FOR THEIR LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE SHEWN TO
HIS POEM IN THE PRESENTATION;

BEN JONSON,
THE GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGER,
DEDICATES BOTH IT AND HIMSELF.

NEVER, most equal Sisters, had any man a wit so presently excellent, as that it could raise itself; but there must come both matter, occasion, commenders, and favourers to it. If this be true, and that the fortune of all writers doth daily prove it, it behoves the careful to provide well toward these accidents; and, having acquired them, to preserve that part of reputation most tenderly, wherein the benefit of a friend is also defended. Hence is it, that I now render myself grateful, and am studious to justify the bounty of your act; to which, though your mere authority were satisfying, yet, it being an age wherein poetry and the professors of it hear so ill on all sides, there will a reason be looked for in the subject. It is certain, nor can it with any forehead be opposed, that the too much license of poetasters in this time hath much deformed their mistress; that, everyday, their manifold and manifest ignorance doth stick unnatural reproaches upon her: but for their petulancy, it were

10

VOLPONE

OR

THE FOX

THE ARGUMENT

VOLPONE, childless, rich, feigns sick, despairs,

Offers his state to hopes of several heirs,

Lies languishing; his parasite receives

Presents of all, assures, deludes: then weaves

Other cross plots, which ope themselves, are told.

New tricks for safety are sought; they thrive: when bold,

Each tempts th' other again, and all are sold.

PROLOGUE

Now, luck yet send us, and a little wit

Will serve to make our play hit;

(According to the palates of the season)

Here is rhyme, not empty of reason:

This we were bid to credit, from our poet,

Whose true scope, if you would know it,

In all his poems, still hath been this measure,

To mix profit with your pleasure;

And not as some, whose throats, their envy failing,

Cry hoarsely, 'All he writes is railing':

And, when his plays come forth, think they can flout them

With saying he was a year about them.

To these there needs no lie, but this his creature,

Which was, two months since, no feature;

And, though he dares give them five lives to mend it,

ACT I

Scene I

(A room in VOLPONE's house)

Enter VOLPONE and MOSCA

VOLP. Good morning to the day; and next, my gold.
Open the shrine that I may see my saint.

(MOSCA draws aside the curtain, revealing piles of gold,
plate, jewels, etc., ^{gold})

Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is
The teeming earth to see the long'd-for sun
Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram,
Am I, to view thy splendour darkening his:
That lying here, amongst my other hoards,
Show'st like a flame by night; or like the day
Struck out of chaos when all darkness fled
Unto the centre. 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.
Well did wise poets, by thy glorious name,
Title that age which they would have the best;
Thou being the best of things, and far transcending
All style of joy in children, parents, friends,
Or any other waking dream on earth.
Thy looks when they to Venus did ascribe,
They should have given her twenty thousand Cupids; 20
Such are thy beauties and our loves! Dear saint,
Riches, the dumb god, that giv'st all men tongues,
That canst do nought, and yet mak'st men do all things;