

College of Arts – Department of English

Third Year- Drama- Volpone

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First Lecture

1. Introduction

“It is a satire David Bevington writes in his essay about Ben Jonson’s Volpone and continues without sparing the question of the play’s genre another thought. There is, however, no unanimous opinion on the matter, as the ease with which Bevington comes to his conclusion would suggest. The play is too complex to be classified that quickly. Although the satirical overtones are undeniable, Jonson was influenced by more than just classical satire. As a consequence, Volpone shows traces of other genres, some of them closely related to the satire. The objective here will be to examine a small choice of literary traditions aside from satire and their possible influence on Jonson’s play. Furthermore, a closer look has to be taken at the definition of satire and its comparability with Volpone.

2. Volpone — a Satire?

2.1 Influences on Volpone

2.1.1 THE BEAST FABLE

One of the more obvious influences on the play is the beast fable, which is defined as a short tale in which “animals and birds speak and behave like human beings [...] usually illustrating some moral point.”^[1] ^[2] As Dutton observes, “no other play of its era is so fully peopled with characters who are explicitly animals, birds, and insects, behaving exactly in the manner of Aesop’s archetypal beasts, as the text knowingly reminds us.”^[3] Jonson even gives his characters names which identify them as their animal counterparts in fables. There is Volpone, the protagonist, whose character is almost identical to that of his namesake, the fox. Like the animal, he “feigns death in order to catch predatory birds.”^[4] The

similarities do not end with the actual creature, however. Volpone also shares features which have been ascribed to the fox in mythology. He certainly qualifies as a “crafty shape-shifter”^[5], since he spends a large part of the play in disguise, fooling almost everyone around him. The protagonist himself makes references to the resemblance between his plot and events in the fables of Aesop: “Good!—and not a fox/Stretched on the earth, with fine delusive sleights, / Mocking a gaping crow?”^[6] Volpone's victims are just as aptly named: Voltore, Corvino, and Corbaccio, the vulture, crow, and raven. They all personify the faults which were associated with the birds whose names they carry. Vultures “were associated with avarice, particularly in lawyers, but also with their persuasiveness.”^[7] Voltore certainly fits the bill perfectly, as he demonstrates in his pursuit of Volpone's riches and his manipulation of the Avocatori in court. Corvino and Corbaccio match their animal foils just as well. The former's treatment of his wife can be seen as an ironic hint to the “medieval fable of a white crow turned black by Apollo for tattling on his wife's infidelity”^[8], while the latter's treatment of his son corresponds to the idea of ravens neglecting their offspring.^[9] Mosca is an equally good example. Volpone, other characters, and he himself constantly call him a “parasite”^[10]. His relationship to his master reflects the relationship between the parasitic fly and the fox. At first he only lives off Volpone's possessions and seems to help him with his schemes, but later in the play he turns on his master. Like the flies, Mosca turns out to be “the best cure for the ‘fox's evil’.”^[11]

Of course, this does not mean that Volpone is a beast fable. The characters may be called Voltore or Covino, but they are still completely human and not just animals acting like humans.

2.1.2 THE MORALITY PLAY

Another possible source for inspiration for Jonson's Volpone could have been the late morality plays; “dramatized allegories, in which personified virtues, vices, diseases, and temptations struggle for the soul of Man as he travels from birth to death.”^[12] ^[13] Obviously, Jonson's play is not about the life of Man, but it does feature characters similar to vices and virtues.

Volpone and Mosca, who victimize both the ‘estates’ and the virtues, provide Jonson's Venetian equivalent for the vices who traditionally impose their will upon a world which by its acquiescence and complicity has granted them power.

Indeed, Volpone and his parasite resemble “in their use of disguise and their love of mischief for its own sake”^[14] those vices very much. On the other hand, there are Celia and Bonario, the innocent victims. If the protagonist and Mosca are to be identified as vices, because of their single mindedness, then the two only moral characters in the play can be seen as the equivalent of the virtues in morality plays. Accordingly, Alan C. Dessen claims that [Celia's] prime function is to represent not a psychologically realized individual but rather, like Simplicity in *The Three Ladies* or Christianity in *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* or Piers Plowman in *A Knack to Know a Knave*, a helpless victim whose plight can suggest the effects upon society of Volpone's way of life.^[15] Both Celia and Bonario remain incapable of betraying their values, even in the face of punishment. “Sir, I will sit down, /And rather wish my innocence should suffer, /Than I resist the authority of a father.” Bonario's attitude in court shows that he is the sheer definition of a virtuous son, who ends up suffering because of the “Vice- like powers of Volpone and Mosca”^[16] Another aspect which links the protagonist and his parasite to the tradition of the morality play's vices is their choice of victims: “witnesses, lawyers, or judges”^[17] In the Lucre plays they are “bribed [...] in order to subvert justice.”^[18] Volpone does almost the same thing; he manipulates everyone (except, of course, for the two virtuous characters) with the promise of his fortune

Second Lecture

Plot Overview

Volpone takes place in seventeenth-century Venice, over the course of one day. The play opens at the house of Volpone, a Venetian nobleman. He and his "parasite" Mosca—part slave, part servant, part lackey—enter the shrine where Volpone keeps his gold. Volpone has amassed his fortune, we learn, through dishonest means: he is a con artist. And we also learn that he likes to use his money extravagantly.

Soon, we see Volpone's latest con in action. For the last three years, he has been attracting the interest of three legacy hunters: Voltore, a lawyer; Corbaccio, an old gentleman; and Corvino, a merchant—individuals interested in inheriting his estate after he dies. Volpone is known to be rich, and he is also known to be childless, have no natural heirs. Furthermore, he is believed to very ill, so each of the legacy hunters lavishes gifts on him, in the hope that Volpone, out of gratitude, will make him his heir. The legacy hunters do not know that Volpone is actually in excellent health and merely faking illness for the purpose of collecting all those impressive "get-well" gifts.

In the first act, each legacy hunter arrives to present a gift to Volpone, except for Corbaccio, who offers only a worthless (and probably poisoned) vial of medicine. But Corbaccio agrees to return later in the day to make Volpone his heir, so that Volpone will return the favor. This act is a boon to Volpone, since Corbaccio, in all likelihood, will die long before Volpone does. After each hunter leaves, Volpone and Mosca laugh at each's gullibility. After Corvino's departure Lady Politic Would-be, the wife of an English knight living

in Venice, arrives at the house but is told to come back three hours later. And Volpone decides that he will try to get a close look at Corvino's wife, Celia, who Mosca describes as one of the most beautiful women in all of Italy. She is kept under lock and key by her husband, who has ten guards on her at all times, but Volpone vows to use disguise to get around these barriers.

The second act portrays a time just a short while later that day, and we meet Sir Politic Would-be, Lady Politic's husband, who is conversing with Peregrine, an young English traveler who has just landed in Venice. Sir Politic takes a liking to the young boy and vows to teach him a thing or two about Venice and Venetians; Peregrine, too, enjoys the company of Sir Politic, but only because he is hilariously gullible and vain. The two are walking in the public square in front of Corvino's house and are interrupted by the arrival of "Scoto Mantua," actually Volpone in disguise as an Italian mountebank, or medicine-show man. Scoto engages in a long and colorful speech, hawking his new "oil", which is touted as a cure-all for disease and suffering. At the end of the speech, he asks the crows to toss him their handkerchiefs, and Celia complies. Corvino arrives, just as she does this, and flies into a jealous rage, scattering the crows in the square. Volpone goes home and complains to Mosca that he is sick with lust for Celia, and Mosca vows to deliver her to Volpone.

Meanwhile, Corvino berates his wife for tossing her handkerchief, since he interprets it as a sign of her unfaithfulness, and he threatens to murder her and her family as a result. He decrees that, as punishment, she will now no longer be allowed to go to Church, she

cannot stand near windows (as she did when watching Volpone), and, most bizarrely, she must do everything backwards from now on—she must even walk and speak backwards. Mosca then arrives, implying to Corvino that if he lets Celia sleep with Volpone (as a "restorative" for Volpone's failing health), then Volpone will choose him as his heir. Suddenly, Corvino's jealousy disappears, and he consents to the offer.

The third act begins with a soliloquy from Mosca, indicating that he is growing increasingly conscious of his power and his independence from Volpone. Mosca then runs into Bonario, Corbaccio's son, and informs the young man of his father's plans to disinherit him. He has Bonario come back to Volpone's house with him, in order to watch Corbaccio sign the documents (hoping that Bonario might kill Corbaccio then and there out of rage, thus allowing Volpone to gain his inheritance early). Meanwhile Lady Politic again arrives at Volpone's residence, indicating that it is now mid-morning, approaching noon. This time, Volpone lets her in, but he soon regrets it, for he is exasperated by her talkativeness. Mosca rescues Volpone by telling the Lady that Sir Politic has been seen in a gondola with a courtesan (a high-class prostitute). Volpone then prepares for his seduction of Celia, while Mosca hides Bonario in a corner of the bedroom, in anticipation of Corbaccio's arrival. But Celia and Corvino arrive first—Celia complains bitterly about being forced to be unfaithful, while Corvino tells her to be quiet and do her job. When Celia and Volpone are alone together, Volpone greatly surprises Celia by leaping out of bed. Celia had expected an old, infirm man,

but what she gets instead is a lothario who attempts to seduce her with a passionate speech. Always the good Christian, Celia refuses Volpone's advances, at which point Volpone says that he will rape her. But Bonario, who has been witnessing the scene from his hiding place the entire time, rescues Celia. Bonario wounds Mosca on his way out. Corbaccio finally arrives, too late, as does Voltore. Mosca plots, with Voltore's assistance, how to get Volpone out of this mess.

A short while later, in the early afternoon, Peregrine and Sir Politic are still talking. Sir Politic gives the young traveler some advice on living in Venice and describes several schemes he has under consideration for making a great deal of money. They are soon interrupted by Lady Politic, who is convinced that Peregrine is the prostitute Mosca told her about—admittedly, in disguise. But Mosca arrives and tells Lady Politic that she is mistaken; the courtesan he referred to is now in front of the Senate (in other words, Celia). Lady Politic believes him and ends by giving Peregrine a seductive goodbye with a coy suggestion that they see each other again. Peregrine is incensed at her behavior and vows revenge on Sir Politic because of it. The scene switches to the Scrutineo, the Venetian Senate building, where Celia and Bonario have informed the judges of Venice about Volpone's deceit, Volpone's attempt to rape Celia, Corbaccio's disinheritance of his son, and Corvino's decision to prostitute his wife. But the defendants make a very good case for themselves, led by their lawyer, Voltore. Voltore portrays Bonario and Celia as lovers, Corvino as an innocent jilted husband, and Corbaccio as a wounded father nearly killed by his evil son. The

judge are swayed when Lady Politic comes in and (set up perfectly by Mosca) identifies Celia as the seducer of her husband Sir Politic. Further, they are convinced when Volpone enters the courtroom, again acting ill. The judges order that Celia and Bonario be arrested and separated.

In the final act, Volpone returns home tired and worried that he is actually growing ill, for he is now feeling some of the symptoms he has been faking. To dispel his fears, he decides to engage in one final prank on the legacy hunters. He spreads a rumor that he has died and then tells Mosca to pretend that he has been made his master's heir. The plan goes off perfectly, and all three legacy hunters are fooled. Volpone then disguises himself as a Venetian guard, so that he can gloat in each legacy hunter's face over their humiliation, without being recognized. But Mosca lets the audience know that Volpone is dead in the eyes of the world and that Mosca will not let him "return to the world of the living" unless Volpone pays up, giving Mosca a share of his wealth.

Meanwhile, Peregrine is in disguise himself, playing his own prank on Sir Politic. Peregrine presents himself as a merchant to the knight and informs Politic that word has gotten out of his plan to sell Venice to the Turks. Politic, who once mentioned the idea in jest, is terrified. When three merchants who are in collusion with Peregrine knock on the door, Politic jumps into a tortoise-shell wine case to save himself. Peregrine informs the merchants when they enter that he is looking at a valuable tortoise. The merchants decide to jump on the tortoise and demand that it crawls along the floor. They remark loudly upon

its leg-garters and fine hand-gloves, before turning it over to reveal Sir Politic. Peregrine and the merchants go off, laughing at their prank, and Sir Politic moans about how much he agrees with his wife's desire to leave Venice and go back to England.

Meanwhile, Volpone gloats in front of each legacy hunter, deriding them for having lost Volpone's inheritance to a parasite such as Mosca, and he successfully avoids recognition. But his plan backfires nonetheless. Voltore, driven to such a state of distraction by Volpone's teasing, decides to recant his testimony in front of the Senate, implicating both himself but more importantly Mosca as a criminal. Corvino accuses him of being a sore loser, upset that Mosca has inherited Volpone's estate upon his death, and the news of this death surprises the Senators greatly. Volpone nearly recovers from his blunder by telling Voltore, in the middle of the Senate proceeding, that "Volpone" is still alive. Mosca pretends to faint and claims to the Senate that he does not know where he is, how he got there, and that he must have been possessed by a demon during the last few minutes when he was speaking to them. He also informs the Senators that Volpone is not dead, contradicting Corvino. All seems good for Volpone until Mosca returns, and, instead of confirming Voltore's claim that Volpone is alive, Mosca denies it. Mosca, after all, has a will, written by Volpone and in his signature, stating that he is Volpone's heir. Now that Volpone is believed to be dead, Mosca legally owns Volpone's property, and Mosca tells Volpone that he is not going to give it back by telling the truth. Realizing that he has been betrayed, Volpone decides that rather than let Mosca inherit his

wealth, he will turn them both in. Volpone takes off his disguise and finally reveals the truth about the events of the past day. Volpone ends up being sent to prison, while Mosca is consigned to a slave galley. Voltore is disbarred, Corbaccio is stripped of his property (which is given to his son Bonario), and Corvino is publicly humiliated, forced to wear donkey's ears while being rowed around the canals of Venice. At the end, there is a small note from the playwright to the audience, simply asking them to applaud if they enjoyed the play they just saw.

Third Lecture

Themes

Greed

Volpone's satire is directed against "avarice," which can be thought of as greed that extends not just to money but also to all objects of human desire. The play's main thesis is stated by Volpone himself, "What a rare punishment / Is avarice to itself." The punishment—and the central irony of the play—is that while greed drives the search for money, power, and respect, it ends up making everyone in the play look foolish, contemptible, and poorer, both spiritually and financially. A similar idea is stated by both Celia, when she asks in III.vii, "Whither [where] is shame fled human breasts?" and by the judge at the end of the play in his plea that the audience should "learn" from the play what happens to those who succumb to greed, emphasizing that the play's stance on greed is a *didactic* one, intended to teach the audience what greed's real consequences are. Volpone himself starts out as an instrument of this lesson—he dupes the Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore into parting with their goods in the hope of inheriting his—but ends up an object of the lesson as well, for succumbing to his greedy want for sensual pleasure.

The Power of Stagecraft

There is a dichotomy in the play, never entirely resolved, between the devices of stagecraft and the conveyance of moral truth. In other words, there is a tension between the play itself (a play which, Jonson hopes, will be of moral value to those who see it) and what goes on in the play, in which the devices of stagecraft that are involved in the play's actual production are

a source of deceit, confusion, and moral corruption. In other words, Volpone does not merely lie, nor he does not merely deceive; he makes an entire production out of his game, using a special eye ointment to simulate an eye infection, creating a character (the sick Volpone) using wardrobe, make-up, and props. He too seems to share the intention to expose moral folly, with the playwright, Jonson; but this is in the end seen to be another illusion.

Likewise, Mosca and Voltore put on a production to convince the judges of their innocence. They use rhetoric and poetry to tell a story, complete with a shocking "surprise witness" and the graphic use of imagery (the appearance of "impotent" Volpone). The play thus exposes us to many different forms of theatrical illusion as methods of lying, perhaps in the hope of allowing us to better discern which forms of theater are sensationalistic, unhelpful, and inaccurate in their portrayal of reality.

Parasitism

"Everyone's a parasite" to paraphrase Mosca (III.i), and over the course of the play he is proved right, in the sense that everyone tries to live off of the wealth or livelihood of others, without doing any "honest toil" of their own. Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore all try to inherit a fortune from a dying man; and Volpone himself has built his fortune on cons such as the one he is playing now. Parasitism, thus portrayed, is not a form of laziness or desperation, but a form of superiority. The parasite lives by his wits, and feeds off of others, by skillfully manipulating their credulity and goodwill.

Fourth Lecture

Motifs

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The Sacred and the Profane

Volpone, both in his initial speech in Act I and in his seduction speech of Act III, mixes religious language and profane subject matter to a startling poetic effect. In Act I the subject of his worship is money; in Act III it is Celia, or perhaps her body, that inspires prayer-like language. As a foil against this, Celia pleads for a distinction to be restored between the "base" and the "noble," (in other words, between the profane—that which is firmly rooted in our animal natures, and the sacred—that which is divine about humans. Through their respective fates, the play seems to endorse Celia's position, though Jonson invests Volpone's speeches with a great deal of poetic energy and rhetorical ornamentation that make his position attractive and rich, which is again, another source of tension in the play.

Disguise, Deception, and Truth

Jonson creates a complex relationship among disguise, deception, and truth in the play. Disguise sometimes serves simply to conceal, as it does when Peregrine dupes Sir Politic Would-be. But sometimes it reveals inner truths that a person's normal attire may conceal. Volpone, for example, publicly reveals more of his "true self" (his vital, healthy self) when he dresses as Scoto Mantua; and Scoto's speeches seem to be filled with authorial comment from Jonson himself. Furthermore, disguise is seen to exert a certain force and power all of its own; by assuming one, people run the risk of changing their identity, of being unable to escape the disguise. This is

certainly the case for Mosca and Volpone in Act V, whose "disguised" identities almost supersede their actual ones.

"Gulling"

Gulling means "making someone into a fool." The question that the play teaches us to ask is who is being made a fool by whom?.

Volpone plays sick to make the legacy-hunters fools, but Mosca plays the "Fool" (the harmless assistant and entertainer) in order to make Volpone into a fool. To make someone else into a fool is both the primary method characters have for asserting power over one another and the primary way Jonson brings across his moral message: the characters in the play who are made into fools—Corbaccio, Corvino, Voltore, Volpone—are the characters whose morality we are supposed to criticize.

Symbols

Venice

As *the* seat of greed, corruption, and decadence, at least according to the prevailing prejudices, Venice was the beneficiary of years of stereotype in English drama. Italians in general were seen as sensuous, decadent beings, thanks to their extremely sophisticated culture, history of Machiavellian politicians (Lorenzo de Medici, Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli himself) and beautiful (and often erotic) love poetry. Though not things considered particularly awful today, this type of decadence made English people wary

of being infected with immorality, and Venetians were seen as the worst of the bunch. The direct influence of the "power of Venice" to corrupt can best be seen in the Sir Politic Would-be subplot, where the English knight Sir Politic "goes Venetian" and becomes a lying would-be thief. But the Venetian setting probably made the story more believable for most English audiences, signifying the fascination of the play with disguise and deceit, though also, perhaps against Jonson's intentions, distancing them from the play's moral message, by placing the greed in a historic far away place traditionally associated with greed, instead of right in the heart of London.

Animalia

There is a "fable" running throughout the play, through the associations the characters' names create with animals. It is very simple and tells the tale of a cunning "Fox" (*Volpone* in Italian), circled by a mischievous "Fly" (*Mosca* in Italian), who helps the Fox trick several carrion-birds—a vulture (*Voltore*), a crow (*Corvino*) and a raven (*Corbaccio*) into losing their feathers (their wealth). The animal imagery emphasizes the theme of "parasitism" in the play, where one life form feeds off of another. And it should also be remembered that fables are tales with simple moral messages, told for a *didactic* purpose. Though much more complex, *Volpone*, at its heart shares the same purpose, making the use of "fable-like" symbolism appropriate and helpful in understanding the meaning of the play..

Fifth Lecture

Satire in Volpone

Volpone as a beast fable

1. Introduction

“It is a satire David Bevington writes in his essay about Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* and continues without sparing the question of the play’s genre another thought. There is, however, no unanimous opinion on the matter, as the ease with which Bevington comes to his conclusion would suggest. The play is too complex to be classified that quickly. Although the satirical overtones are undeniable, Jonson was influenced by more than just classical satire. As a consequence, *Volpone* shows traces of other genres, some of them closely related to the satire. The objective here will be to examine a small choice of literary traditions aside from satire and their possible influence on Jonson’s play. Furthermore, a closer look has to be taken at the definition of satire and its comparability with *Volpone*.”

2. Volpone — a Satire?

2.1 Influences on Volpone

2.1.1 THE BEAST FABLE

One of the more obvious influences on the play is the beast fable, which is defined as a short tale in which “animals and birds speak and behave like human beings [...] usually illustrating some moral point.”^{[1] [2]} As Dutton observes, “no other play of its era is so fully peopled with characters who are explicitly animals, birds, and insects, behaving exactly in the manner of Aesop’s archetypal beasts, as the text knowingly reminds us.”^[3] Jonson even gives his characters names which identify them as their animal counterparts in fables. There is Volpone, the protagonist, whose character is almost identical to that of his namesake, the fox. Like the animal, he “feigns death in order to catch predatory birds.”^[4] The similarities do not end with the actual creature, however. Volpone also

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Sixth Lecture

The Significance of the Names of the Characters in *Volpone*. or *Volpone* as a Beast Fable.

In 20th century criticism *Volpone* has been generally acknowledged as a beast fable. Beast fables are the stories about beast in which human qualities are infused in non-human beings. The aim is to explore human follies or to convey moral message or both.

Volpone, in this sense, is undoubtedly a beast fable. The **characters** of the play are beasts in human shape. The majority of characters derive their names from animals. The play also displays the bestial nature of the characters.

Significance of the Names of the Characters in *Volpone*

Volpone, the protagonist, is the cunning fox who tried to lure his prey by pretending to be sick and dying. Mosca, his parasite, is flesh fly, which feeds on everything it can sit upon. Appropriately, he tries to exploit the three legacy hunters and feeds on the sickness of his master.

The three legacy hunters owe their names to predatory birds. Voltore is a vulture. He is gifted with predatorily oriented eyesight. He does not have any family ties. Corbaccio is a raven. A raven was notorious for its hostility to its young ones, if they did not resemble it. In this respect, Corbaccio like a raven tries to disinherit his own son Bonario, who is so different from his father. Similarly, Corvino is crow,. He is greedy of harvest.

In the sub-plot, Sir and Lady Politic Would-be derive their names from parrots. Like a parrot, Sir Politic has no imagination, but he has a capacity to imitate others. Lady Would-be exhausts everyone with her ceaseless chatter. Her imitation of the Venetian fashion also fits with her name and **character**.

The punishment to these beast-like characters is given according to their nature and crimes. Volpone is crippled by iron-chains in prison. Voltore is exiled from the **society** of learned men and from Venice. Corbaccio is confined to a monastery, while Corvino is to be rowed about in Venice. Sir Politic becomes a turtle when he hides himself in the tortoise-shell. Peregrine, like a hawk, will take the tortoise high in the sky and then throw it on the earth to break the shell.

To conclude, the great satirist and reformer Ben Jonson scolded men for correction. He laughs at men not with sympathy but his laughter is curative. The **beast fable** technique helps him to magnify and attack greed, hypocrisy, treachery, flattery, lust and so on.