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A Thematic Study of Jonson's *Volpone*

A Paper

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DEDICATION

To My Family

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First, I would like to thank Allah. I would like to express sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Raad Kareem Abd-Aun, for his special instructions and commitment.

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Abstract

Greed often arises from early negative experiences such as parental absence, inconsistency, or neglect. In later life, feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, often combined with low self-esteem, lead the person to fixate on a substitute for the love and security that he or she so sorely lacked. The pursuit of this substitute distracts from negative feelings, and its accumulation provides much needed comfort and reassurance. Greed, or avarice, is an inordinate or insatiable longing for material gain, be it food, money, status, or power. As a secular psychological concept, greed is an inordinate desire to acquire or possess more than one needs. Many plays have presented this theme among them Macbeth, Hamlet and so many others. Ben Johnson has presented this theme through using satire in *Volpone*.

Keywords: Greed, Ben Johnson, lust, Volpone, hatred, sin

Introduction

Benjamin Johnson was born in London in August 1575 in Westminster. His birth was one month after the death of his father. Two years after his father's death, his mother married in order to support herself and her son with a mason .

Johnson attended private school at St Martin's Lane. A family friend then paid him a stipend to admit him to the prestigious Westminster School in London as a day student who forbade him from participating in the plays that other students annually perform at the school. Johnson received at Westminster School a very good classical and literary education, including extensive instruction in Latin literature and speaking in Latin classes. William Camden was one of his teachers and masters in this school. Johnson was tutored for life by William Camden who helped start Johnson's great learning.¹

The intellectual influence of the Camden Scholarship on the art and style of Johnson's literature remained significant and widespread. Until Camden's death in 1623, Johnson emerged from Westminster School with a good knowledge of Latin drama, which forms the literary background to Johnson's career as a poet and playwright, and his moral inclinations seem to go hand in hand along with his satirical films. Ben Jonson's literary career began in the theater in the mid-1590s as an actor and playwright. His first work humorous comedies *Every Man in His Humour*, which was shown for the first time in 1598 in addition to other plays.²

His influence was unparalleled and extensive on poets and writers of the Jacobean era (1603–1625) and of the Caroline era (1625–1642). Johnson was considered second of the most important English writers after William Shakespeare during the reign of James I. The poet died on

or around August 16, 1637, and his funeral was held the next day. It was attended by "all or most of the nobles in the city at the time".

Among his most important works:

1. Every Man in His Humour (1598).
2. *Volpone*, or The Fox (c. 1606).
3. The Alchemist (1610).
4. Bartholomew Fair (1614) .
5. His lyric and epigrammatic poetry.

Volpone (Italian for "sly fox") is a play consisting of five acts. It was produced in 1605-1606 and published in 1607. The setting of *Volpone* was in Venice, Italy. The author chooses Venice precisely because it was considered by the English to be the center of sinful vices. The purpose of writing the play was to teach lessons about greed and unforgiving lust .³

This paper is a thematic study of Jonson's *Volpone*. It will focus on the theme of greed. The paper will be divided into an introduction, chapter one which will be devoted to the discussion of main themes of the play and minor ones, then a conclusion that sums up the findings of the study.

Notes

1. https://www.bibalex.org/libraries/presentation/static/Jonson_Ben_eng_1302.pdf (accessed on 3/5/2022)
2. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Jonson#cite_ref-EB1911_3-4 (accessed on 3/5/2022)
3. <<https://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/306058> > (accessed on 3/5/2022)

Chapter One

1.1 Major Themes In *Volpone*

Volpone it is one of Ben Johnson's comedies and one of the most well-received. Ben Johnson mocks the "golden age" because it refers to the golden age of Greek mythology. Since this play is an oracle, the main reason for people's moral decline and the perversion of the golden age is human vices. In the golden age, people accentuates tend to deceive others because of greed, vanity, laziness and lust. Instead of the traditional romantic plot on which Shakespeare relied in his comedies, Ben Johnson blended the fortune-seeking plot and character types of Roman comedy with the allegorical local character elements of the moral play and the beast's tale. Johnson masterfully arranges variations on the subject of human greed.⁴

In the center of the play is Volpone, a fox, and his servant Mosca, a fly who extorts fortunes from those who court to serve Volpone. On the other hand, Volpone pretends to be a dying man who needs an heir to fortune. With the opening of the play, Volpone surrenders to trick people into taking gold:

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.
Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is
The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun
. . . 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 . . . (I.i.3–13)⁵

Jonson's fox, Volpone, is shown based on such cunning stratagem. He is a rich, childless magnifico whose major enjoyment in life is his "cunning purchase" (I, i, 31), throughout which he exerts his own wealth:

...., I glory
More in the cunning purchase of my wealth,
Than in the glad possession; since 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 poulder;
I blow no subtle glass; expose no ships
To threat'nings of the furrow-faced sea;
I turn no moneys, in the public bank;
Nor usure private – (I, I, 30-40)

Volpone's speech shows his obsessive nature. His life is going perfectly easy as his genius continues to fleece great riches without the slightest effort, without the need to practice any means of commercial exchange such as trading, farming nor even usury. Moreover; Volpone's cunning purchase provides him with the pleasure of outwitting the less minded victims, the matter which Volpone is obsessed with more than his obsession with possession itself: "Volpone's real pervasion is that he regards life as a play where he can write the script for his own amusement: his sin is not to treat money as a god but to treat people as puppets".⁶

Volpone is thus having a style of life that he does not want to change and has a cunning strategy throughout which he guarantees the continuation of his own world. At the same time, the continuous success in his cunning strategy leads him to go after more as long as he can get what he wants. For Volpone's, his obsession with his strategy, to outwit the lesser minded fellows without the slightest chance of being discovered, leads him to demand what is more valuable than fortunes⁸ Volpone is now tempted to Celia, "the blazing star of Italy" (I, v, 107) as being affected by Mosca's description of her as:

.....! a wench
O' the first year, a beauty, ripe, as harvest!
Whose skin is whiter than a swan, all over!
Than silver, snow, or lilies! A soft lip,
Would tempt you to eternity of kissing!
And flesh that melteth, in the touch, to blood!
Bright as your gold! And lovely as your gold!
(I, v, 108-114)

Now Volpone wants to get the possession of Celia as he has kept continuously for three years getting possession of her husband's wealth but firstly Volpone is facing a challenge, the capability to see Celia who is surrounded by "a guard of ten spies thick" (I, v, 123). The fox thus decides to get out of his liar "in some disguise" (I, v, 128) to see Celia at her window. Volpone's choice for his new character would be the Scoto of Mantua, a mountebank, a kind of theatrical doctor who sells medicine publicly.⁷

The essential significance of the mountebank scene lies in its importance as a key scene in the play thematically and structurally. In this scene, Volpone frees himself from his "death bed" to seize the actions of the play as he transforms from playing the role of an old dying man to take the disguise of the mountebank, performing at the same time, the role of the lover as he woos Celia just below her window.⁸

Venice (generally Italy) was known at the time for its particular form of greed and moral and political corruption. The subplot includes fear of espionage, but Volpone's interest is primarily in a special kind of greed. Most of the ways in which Volpone enables political corruption is to explore becoming people morally corrupt. The Italian men in the play are corrupted by greed, which means greed or excessive desire:

I will conclude with this,
That vicious persons, when they're hot and flesh'd

In impious acts, their constancy abounds:
Damn'd deeds are done with greatest confidence (IV.vi,50-
53)

On the other hand, Mosca's right in the sense that everyone tries as the game progresses live away from the wealth and livelihood of others without doing anything their own "honest effort".

Honesty here is the first attribute of masculinity to be sacrificed in favour of gold. He joyfully describes the con he has been recently running. Since he has no heirs, and is extremely wealthy, people are interested in his wealth and whom it will go to when he dies. Volpone enjoys deceiving others even more than gaining more gold: "Yet I glory / More in the cunning purchase of my wealth / Than in the glad possession; sinc I gain / No common way, I use no trade, no venture" (1.1.30–33). As the rivalry over his inheritance gets more competitive, the legacy hunters become willing to sacrifice more than just coins. They are willing to lay their own masculinity, whether in terms of their own honor or their wives', on the line.⁹

As Ben Jonson's debate over Volpone ridicules greed, which he describes as blinding the suitors vying to become Volpone's heir, and reflects the impact of contemporary greed on society's justice systems and social relations, Ben Jonson wanted Volpone to be a party to the process. Early because the sin of greed in this climate gives way to the practice of luxury. Moreover, Volpone notes that while greed was destructive on a small scale, the impulse to consume was more comprehensive and energetic.¹⁰

The act of being grasping always brings on its very own punishment. He is regarding his would-be heirs here, however additionally unwittingly foretelling his personal downfall. Audiences

would possibly root for Volpone in his first plots and take satisfaction in his capacity to control others, however Volpone's preference for satisfaction turns into so immoderate and insatiable that the play activates him and ends together along with his punishment.¹¹ The harsh sentencing rendered on the cease of the play reinforces Jonson's ethical lesson to keep away from excess.⁴ "Hold thee, Mosca"/Take of my hand ; thou strik'st on truth in all:/And they are envious ,terms thee parasite"(I, i, 1-3)

In the play, among many characters who are very greedy about making money and desiring more such as Volpone and Mosca. Money is represented in the play through medicines and alchemical images as the best and purest cure for all ills. Money is also represented as a sort of religion to those obsessed with money that Mosca represents. The play shows that people are willing to do anything for money that leads their work to moral lapses and they all become convinced that they will inherit the entire fortune of the Volpone after his death and also that they jeopardize their values and can easily manipulate them:

Dear saint,
Riches, the dumb god, that giv'st 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,
Honour, and all things else. Who can get thee,
He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise.[I.i. 21-27]

The play focuses on financial satire in Italy to the fullest and is set in Venice (as its title suggests). Part of the writer's job is to leave a lesson to the public, so Ben Jonson expresses his fear that London will fall prey to moral bankruptcy when it becomes a pursuit of wealth. For viewers and readers, the play hopes that it will surpass materialistic morals in order not to have its ending, as in the case of the play's main characters:

To make a snare for mine own neck! and run
My head into it, wilfully! with laughter!
When I had newly scap'd, was free and clear
Out of mere wantonness! O, the dull devil
Was in this brain of mine when I devis'd it,
And Mosca gave it second; he must now
Help to sear up this vein, or we bleed dead [V.xi.1-7]

Volpone is the epitome of greed and hedonism : he enjoys pleasure in all of its manifestations and indulges in the way he deceives three gullible men, all of them bearing the names of predatory birds – Voltore (from Italian – meaning vulture), Corbaccio (raven) and Corvino (crow). Thus greed is presented as “a characteristic of the society as a whole”. But the difference between Volpone and his would-be heirs is that Volpone is greedy not only for wealth, but for “gaining more power over his victims”. The protagonist is very much contented that he receives gifts, but what gives him real satisfaction is the fact that his plans for manipulating people into giving him presents work very well.¹²

1.2 Minor Themes

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 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.

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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 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.¹⁴

Corvino, Corbaccio, Voltore all try Inheriting property from a dying person. The driving force behind the play's plot is the desire for money, which drives three men to steal Volpone's property and manipulate Volpone to attempt fraud. In the play's opening scene, Volpone shows how much the Italians value money when he delivers a blasphemous speech in which he calls money "the world's soul" and praises it like a god. Money, he says, is everything, and whoever has money is naturally imbued with nobility, valiance, honesty, and wisdom.

In Volpone's world, with gold replacing masculinity, he seems to prefer to have himself called rich rather than honourable and by extension better than living up to any masculine image. As he says good morning to his gold, we understand the way in which Volpone collects his treasures, which is presumably through cons.¹⁵

Parasitism, on the other hand "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.¹⁶

The idea of pleasure from punishment is not unfamiliar to Volpone himself as he praises Mosca for his mastery of intrigue and mocks Corbaccio's old age, saying "What a rare punishment / Is avarice to itself!" (1.4.143–4). Volpone enjoys the idea that he feeds avarice to make it his punishing tool. Furthermore, when Volpone drafts and names Mosca as his sole heir, he secretly delights in the disappointment of Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore. Together, Volpone and Mosca laugh at the pains of these three "clients" and what they have gone through as all three are willing to compromise their image as respectable men in favor of worldly gain.¹⁷

Beside this, women has to be mentioned, in the 17th century, men performed all business roles, were considered "masters" of their house, and ruled over their wives and daughters. *Volpone* presents two different views of marriage through the relationships of Corvino and Celia, and Sir and Lady Politick Would-Be. The relationship between Corvino and Celia is an example of a traditional Venetian marriage, in which the man holds all the power—and is corrupted by it—while the virtuous woman quietly suffers.¹⁸

Jonson takes the stereotypical depiction of a jealous, controlling Italian husband to the extreme, with Corvino locking his beautiful wife in a tower and forbidding her from standing too close to the window. He verbally berates and threatens his wife when he suspects infidelity, calling her a "whore" and threatening to stab her with his sword for dropping a handkerchief out the window. When Celia refuses to willingly sleep with Volpone, Corvino again threatens her life and drags her to Volpone's bed.¹⁹

In court, the audience sees how Italian society distrusts even the most virtuous and obedient of women. Simply because of her sex, Celia is perceived as too emotional and hysterical to give believable testimony. This absurdity is contrasted by the court's admittance of Volto's testimony even as he writhes on the ground and claims to be possessed by the devil. At the end of the play, Volpone receives his punishment not for attempted rape, but for deceiving the legacy-hunters, furthering the idea that the experiences and trauma of women are considered unimportant compared to the crimes against men.²⁰

The marriage between Sir and Lady Politick Would-Be is quite different. Lady Politick is an independent woman who travels around Italy without her husband's companionship, speaks freely and openly with men, and concocts her own plan to weasel her way into Volpone's will. Although afforded more freedoms, Jonson's portrayal of Lady Politick Would-Be is equally negative. She talks incessantly, to everyone's annoyance, with Volpone even suggesting her idle prattle makes him sick. Far more than Celia, Lady Politick Would-Be represents a woman's emotional hysteria, such as when she accuses Peregrine of being a prostitute in disguise, and blindly accuses Celia in court without evidence.²¹

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. Volto 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.²²

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.²³

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.²⁴

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.²⁵

Notes

5. Ben Jonson, *Volpone*. Robert N. Watson (ed.), (London: The New Mermaid, 2003.) all the following references are going to be from this copy.
6. Jonas A. Barish, "The Double Action in *Volpone*" in *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963):93. https://www.academia.edu/47215980/Jonson_s_Theatre_of_Confinement (accessed on 2/5/2022)
7. Don Beecher, "The Progress of Trickster in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*", *Cahiers Elizabethains*. Vol.27. April, 1985, 43-51.
8. Ibid, 44.
9. B.P Chaudhuri, *Ben Jonson's Volpone*. (New Delhi: Aarti Book Centre, 1985.) 98.
10. Ibid
11. Ralph A. Cohen, "The Setting of *Volpone*", *Renaissance Papers*, 1978, (64-75.)
12. John Creaser, "*Volpone*: the Mortifying of the Fox". *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism*, Vol.25, 1975, pp.329-56.
13. Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *Volpone: Text and Performance*. (London: Macmillan Publishing Ltd, 1985.)111
14. Ibid.
15. Creaser, 333.
16. Barish, 94-95.

17.Ibid.

18.Ibid.

19.< <https://www.literatureworld.in/2021/03/volpone-themes.html>>
(accessed on 14/5/2022)

20. E.D Wayne, “Drama and society in the age of Jonson: An alternative view”,in: Dutton, R. (Ed.) *Ben Jonson*. (Harlow, Essex, Longman,2000) : 26-49.

21.Ibid,30.

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24.< <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/volpone/themes>> (accessed on 13/5/2023)

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Conclusion

In *Volpone*, the punishments at the end of the play capture the essence of the crime itself; for instance, Volpone's greed for pleasure at the expense of others makes him a prisoner of his desires, long before he is put into chains. *Volpone* does not end up happily. The 1st Avocatore himself emphasizes the didactic purpose of the punishments, which the whole Venetian society (including the audience) should observe:

Which may not be revoked. Now you begin,
When crimes are done and past, and to be punished,
To think what your crimes are: away with them.
Let all that see these vices thus rewarded,
Take heart, and love to study 'em. Mischiefs feed
Like beasts. Till they be fat, and then they bleed (5.12.150)

The penalty ties up the moral of the story in the sense that harshness is mandated by Jonson's play. *Volpone*, the harsh and yet comic punishments are emasculating as they strip the guilty party from either their heterosexuality or honor. In Jonson's *Volpone*, dark comedy serves to ridicule the subject of failed masculinity in a comic manner. Characters who fail to embody the commonly accepted characteristics of masculinity are men who are willing to forfeit their gender, sacrifice honesty or suffer emasculation.

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