

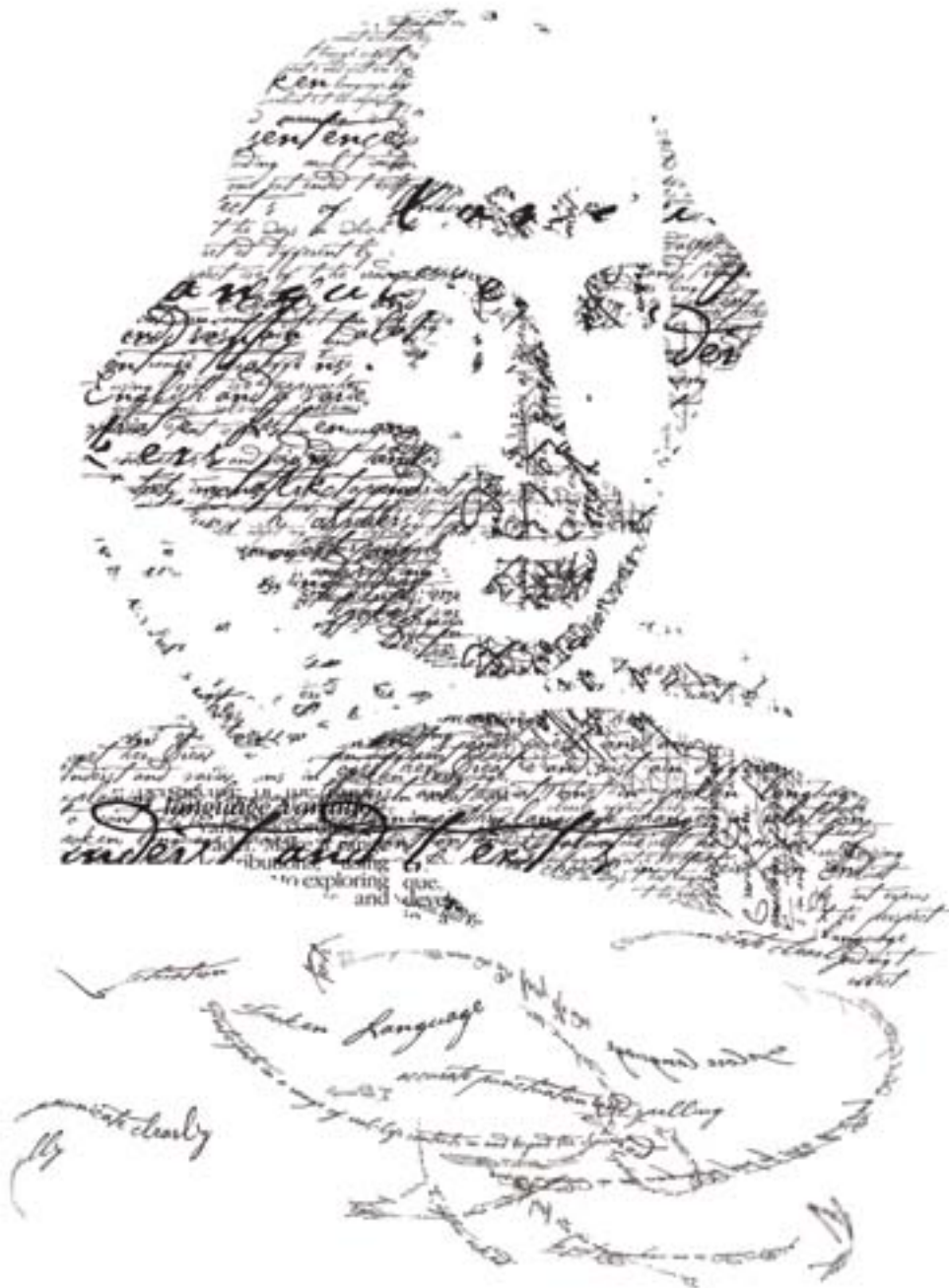
A LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE H071 H471

INTRODUCTION AND GUIDED READING

VOLPONE

Ben Jonson



Ben Jonson - Volpone

From September 2012, OCR will be introducing new set texts for unit F663. To support you and your learners through this change, OCR has commissioned senior members of the examining team to write an introduction and guided reading list for each text in Section B. You can choose to use these materials with your learners as you see fit.

Ben Jonson Volpone

Personality

Cantankerous, self-aggrandising, tempestuous, crude, full of theories, endlessly self-renewing, obese and bibulous, Jonson is probably the best-known personality among the Jacobean dramatists. He was compared throughout his career with Shakespeare, whom he praised and criticised in pretty equal measure. He thought Shakespeare an artist 'for all time' whom he loved 'on this side idolatry'; yet (a notoriously slow writer himself) he lamented Shakespeare's (excessive) fluency, also pointing out that the Stratfordian's classical learning was rudimentary in contrast to his own. Jonson outlived many of his contemporary dramatists and became a go-to figure for anecdotes about them, though he tended to be a little self-aggrandising in his judgements.

He was born in 1572, growing up in Hartshorn Lane, near the Strand. He studied at Westminster School where he was taught by William Camden, one of the great scholars of the age, who instilled in him a rigid love of the Classics.

'Bricklayer' gives a misleading impression of his stepfather's profession - he was a sort of master-mason, an architect in newly-fashionable brick not stone, and therefore part of the City's accelerating growth. Jonson drudged under his father for a while, but didn't seem enchanted with the labour. Instead he joined the English expedition to the Low Countries, displaying an appetite for combat that featured in a long line of personal and literary squabbles. Jonson outdid even Marlowe's violent achievements. He killed a man in single combat in the Netherlands, then in 1600 notoriously stabbed his fellow-actor Gabriel Spencer in a duel, escaping a capital charge by pleading 'benefit of clergy'. His learning saved him from something worse than a branded thumb. Bernard Shaw called him a 'brutal pedant'.

For further detail, see David W.Kay, *Ben Jonson: A Literary Life* (1995).

AO4 Biographical contexts

Jonson in the theatre

Jonson is thought to have become involved professionally in the theatre on his return from the wars in 1592. He started as an (undistinguished) actor, learning the dramatist's craft from the boards. His first comedy was the socially precise comic hit of 1598, *Every Man in his Humour*, which popularised the theory, ultimately traceable back to Hippocrates, that human personality could be explored from the point of view of a single dominant quality or 'humour'. Some critics have used the reductiveness of this psychological approach as an excuse for undervaluing Jonson's dramatic art, though the satirical coherence of characters such as amoral Voltore, pimping Corvino and deaf Corbaccio in *Volpone* is surely enhanced by their being demonstrably possessed by 'one peculiar quality.' As L.C. Knights pointed out, 'they represent but a narrow class even among birds of prey.'

Despite the 'humour vogue' he created (satirised in Shakespeare's *Corporal Nym*), however, Jonson, always short of money, decided that his theatrical gifts might be better rewarded working directly for the Crown. He collaborated with designer and architect Inigo Jones on a series of elaborately costumed and decorated dramatic interludes known as Court Masques, which proved greatly to the taste of Elizabeth's successor, James I. *Volpone* (1606), intriguingly, was Jonson's first stage-comedy for some years, and is both a diversion from writing Masques and (in some ways) an experiment in how aspects of Masque, especially Mosca's Interlude for *Volpone*'s strange 'kids', might be incorporated in the more complex and varied form of a full-length play. Jonson, who had a reputation for slow, laboured composition and who was cruelly pilloried by his fellow-dramatist Marston for his tardiness in coming up with rhymes, delights in telling us that *Volpone* was the work of just five weeks, done without help from a collaborator.

For Jonson's Masques see David Lindley, ed., *Court Masques* (1995).

AO4 Literary contexts

Post counter plot

In the next ten years, Jonson did much of his greatest writing: he was also the object of constant suspicion by authority. He was viewed as an unreliable figure, especially in the light of his recent conversion to Roman Catholicism. Topical references buried in his 1605 Roman tragedy *Sejanus* earned Jonson a summons before the Privy Council. As if this was not enough, Jonson became implicated in the Gunpowder Plot by dining with its leader Robert Catesby in October 1605. A colourful period of intrigue in Radical Catholic circles thus coincided with the writing of Jonson's best-known tragedy, *Sejanus*, and arguably his comic masterpiece, *Volpone*. It was in *Sejanus*, where the dissolute Emperor Tiberius rounds on his henchman-procurer *Sejanus* and has him torn publicly to pieces, that Jonson first uses the villain-on-villain counterplot theme that propels the final acts of both *Volpone* and his other great comedy, *The Alchemist*. Jonson soon discovered that in the theatre the biter can be bit not once but several times, which may reflect personal experience during his brief sortie onto the stage of Jacobean high politics and espionage.

AO4 Social, political and religious contexts

Jonson's Venice

The romantic, exotic and often sinister setting of Italian sovereign duchies and petty kingdoms is a staple of English Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, variously a setting of Courtly Love, murderous intrigue and rampant and corrupt clericalism. Venice, setting for Jonson's *Volpone*, was a different proposition. It was a City State, 'the mother-city of splendid vice', famously liberal, commercially vibrant, and one of the few dukedoms to possess an overseas Empire. The first act of Shakespeare's *Othello* picks up on these imperial concerns, while *The Merchant of Venice*, like *Volpone*, is more obviously preoccupied with the commercialism of the City. All three plays render Venice as a vibrant master-economy, apt to treat girls as golden fleeces and dupes as garbage, but a place where poetry beats its wings attractively too. All three celebrate the city's astonishing cosmopolitanism, famously witnessed by Thomas Coryat on his 1611 visit there (five years after Jonson's play was written).

For here in the Square of St Mark is the greatest magnificence of architecture to be seene, that any place under the sunne doth yeelde.

Here you may both see all manner of fashions of attire, and heare all the languages of Christendome, besides those that are spoken by the barbarous Ethnickes, that . . . a man may very properly call it . . . a market place of the world, not of the citie. . .'

Neither Jonson nor Shakespeare ever visited Venice, so far as we know, but both were familiar with travellers' tales brought back by doughty visitors like Sir Politic Would-be.

The dream-Venice of *Volpone* is a typically solid product of Jonson's imagination, for, as Mary McCarthy suggests, 'a wholly materialist city is nothing but a dream incarnate.' William Drummond of Hawthornden was a first-hand witness when Jonson was busy incarnating dream-worlds. His visitor consumed 'a whole night in lying looking at his great toe, about which he hath seen Tartars and Turks, Romans and Carthaginians, fight in his imagination.' Among such re-enactments getting the Venetian slang right in *Volpone* would have been mere hack-work.

AO2, AO4 Importance
of setting

Volpone: A city comedy

Volpone is most like the characteristic 'City Comedies' of Jacobean London – the work of Middleton, Dekker and Jonson himself – in the vigorous fluency of its language. As usual, Jonson goes further than his contemporaries in mimicking the argot, especially the technical jargon, of the wide-boys, charlatans and cony-catchers of Bankside and Eastcheap. But in Volpone, with its musical-box setting, he omits the 'mess, complexity and specificity', as Matthew Steggle calls it, of the jostling city hustlers, the sense of the world beyond the stage-apron reflecting the onstage action, that is so much a feature of the London-rooted Alchemist or Bartholomew Fair.

The play is also more stylish, as Victorian poet Swinburne noted long ago:

There is in Volpone a touch of something like imagination, a savour of something like romance, which gives a higher tone to the style and a deeper interest to the action [than in The Alchemist] (1889).

The style of Volpone is, by any standards, 'high'. Apart from the interludes from Volpone's children and the prose-patter from 'Scoto of Mantua', the entire play is composed in blank verse. Yet the effect could not be further from the seamless lyricism of Shakespeare's Romantic Comedy. Jonson's blank verse lines are rammed with objects, discrete consumer units of meaning, so that the audience never forgets that this is a wealthy City, and that its wealth is ultimately no more than an addition sum of inert, and sometimes sordidly gathered, commodities. 'The verse demands . . . scrupulous inspection of each word,' writes L.C. Knights, 'we are not allowed to lapse into an impression of generalised magnificence.'

This is true of all the great 'Marlovian' arias in the play: Volpone's greeting of his ironic saint (1:1) which parodies the opening soliloquy in *The Jew of Malta*; Mosca's hymn to parasites (3:1), which resembles one of Tamburlaine's outbursts; and particularly Volpone's Faustus-like bid for Celia's imagination (and person) in 3:7:

*If thou hast imagination, hear me, Celia.
Thy baths shall be the juice of July-flowers,
Spirit of roses, and of violets,
The milk of unicorns, and panthers' breath
Gather'd in bags, and mixt with Cretan wines
(3:7, 411-14).*

All of this is viable, given enough slaves and skivvies, and a charlatan, like Volpone's alias, Scoto of Mantua, might supply the unicorns' milk. But it certainly constitutes conspicuous consumption. Volpone's pleasure dictates the slaughter of the world's only phoenix (3:7, 203). Every phrase costs a packet, and is noted down, with appropriate care, in a poetical accountant's ledger. 'Is your pearl orient, sir?' Mosca asks Corvino, remembering that some pearls are of great, some of lesser price (1:1, 470). Volpone likes to work his temptations with a kind of reusable 'cherry' (1:1, 89). He knocks it against the teeth of his victim, then pulls it back and stores it away for next time. Maximum effect: minimal cost. A favourite rhetorical device is outbidding. If Sir Pol has heard of three porpoises at London bridge, Peregrine rounds it up to 'six, and a sturgeon, sir'. Jonson's inventory style, as John J. Enck argues, 'unites everything, from Volpone's vaunting declarations to Lady Pol's inane twaddle.'

AO2 'Commodification' of blank verse
AO4 Social and literary contexts

Eat or be Eaten

Worship of wealth in *Volpone* is less literally malodorous than in Jonson's first play, *The Case is Altered* (1597), where the miser carries his gold about in a scuttle of horse-dung, but it is just as subversive. It becomes a surrogate religion, with chequered-hoards the objects of devotion, and gold-stashes the saints: a parody of Catholic superstition that would no doubt have delighted and scandalised a newly Protestant English audience.

Volpone not only picks up on the sordid devotions of wealth-addiction: it also celebrates the adrenaline-rush by which capitalists and the capitalist dream conquer the world. The cunning devices *Volpone* uses to gain wealth are as valuable to him as the end product. He is a consummate performer: as Scoto in the Mountebank scene, his patter is a witty parody of a Jacobean quack, with its cascades of afflictions:

the mal caduco, cramps, convulsions, paralyties, epilepsies, tremor-cordia, retired nerves, ill vapours of the spleen, stopping of the liver, the stone, the strangury, hernia ventosa, iliaca passio; stops a disenteria.

All these quivering maladies mimic ructions in the body-politic: they might stand for fluctuations in the market, for example, unravelling speculations, or the afflatus of the hopeful gambler. Everyone in Jonson's Venice is watching closely for symptoms like these, in the hope that they may make a killing at someone else's expense. As Jonson was to write late in life, his was a 'money-get, mechanic age.' Bonario's analysis of *Voltore* is trenchant: 'His soul moves in his fee' (4:5, 96). Men eat men, drink gold; women wait to be eaten: the only honest – nay, glorious – office, as scene-stealing Mosca rhapsodises, is that of parasite.

AO2 The play's commercial symbolism
AO4 Social and religious contexts



Living Like Animals

Animal costumes are often a no-brainer for well-funded designers of a production of *Volpone*, but may not fully reflect Jonson's literary purpose. As Simon Trussler points out:

While it can be entertaining to dress up *Volpone* as a fox, *Mosca* as a fly, *Corbaccio* as a crow, or *Sir Pol* as a parrot, this is not really Jonson's point: and to universalise the play into folklore is to dull the edge of its satire.

As Robert Macdonald commented of a Tyrone Guthrie production, where ornithological dress was conspicuous, 'It is difficult to condemn real vultures for behaving like vultures.' But if the *Beast-Fable* is better gesturing from the upper stage of allegory rather than grovelling about in bird-suits, it is, nevertheless, important that a production should reflect it, or at least reflect upon it. Through it Jonson catches the knaves of *Volpone* strutting about in breeding plumage, rustling the trough, or puffing up and looking big when they have much to be humble about. In Act 5, when all the play's mechanisms quicken, they have to perform extravagant bestial 'turns', with *Sir Pol* made to 'creep' like a tortoise (5:4,70), and the vulture swooping down possessed (5:12, 23).

The *Beast Fable* has a long history in western literature, and has figured in influential twentieth century writings, too, such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, the Early Middle English debate poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and the mock-heroic epic, *Reynard the Fox*, translated by Caxton in 1481, all make use of talking beasts, and the latter, at least, was very familiar to Jonson.

Detailed parallels between the epic and the presentation of the fox in Jonson's play are explored in R.B. Parker's introduction to the Revels Student Edition.

The curious chorus of *Dwarf*, *Hermaphrodite* and *Eunuch* don't quite belong to the *Beast Fable*. They are neither fully human nor recognisably bestial, monsters begotten on the outcasts of society when *Volpone* was drunk, and now leering, intermittent presences overlooking his designs (*Mosca* sends them packing, 5:11,10). They are hard to bring off on-stage, speaking outside the play's norm of blank verse, and moving without its customary style, in a 'limping jig'. They are usually seen as the objective correlative of its hero's bitter heart: grotesque, unassimilated, unloved, often, even by the actors who have to play them. Audiences are not so amused as they were in Jonson's day by simple deformity. We prefer to see inner kinks manifest outwardly: lawyers with the souls and manners of carrion-birds.

AO2 Staging the grotesque in *Volpone*
AO3 Production choices
regarding the *beast fable*

English Contexts

Though set in Venice, accounts of Volpone have, from the first, discerned something residually English about the 'worlds' of Jonson's play, and with the rise of contextual study of literature, this interest has increased. There is a grisly link between the punishment Corvino promises his wife if she will not sleep with Volpone, and the judicial maiming with which the three incarcerated authors of *Eastward Ho* were threatened in 1605. Corvino promises to 'rip up / [Celia's] mouth unto thine ears; and slit thy nose / Like a raw rochet' (3:7, 98-99). That was just about what Jonson was expecting, languishing in prison, when he, Chapman and Marston had satirised King James's sale of knighthoods to Scottish favourites. The reference brings the methods of the Jacobean police-state brutally close.

There has been inevitably much interest, too, and widespread disagreement, about what the play might have to say on the subject of the Gunpowder Plot, in which Jonson had become implicated as a source of Government information. Various parallels are suggested by Frances Teague, one of a group of academics to have published extensively on the subject (others include W.W.E. Slights and Robert Dutton):

Not only does the titular hero, the fox, echo the name of Guy Fawkes, as William Sessions has pointed out, but the play features a bungled investigation, an unjust trial, and the providential discovery of truth despite legal corruption and incompetence.

Sir Politic, discerning plots everywhere, thinking baboons are spies (2:1, 88), trying to be Italian by playing 'Nick Machiavel', seems a parody of the anti-Catholic suspicions which must have threatened (and annoyed) the Catholic Jonson in 1606. Possibly he intended a riposte to silly scaremongering about the dangers of gunpowder when Sir Pol frets that his tinder-box might accidentally ignite the Arsenal (4:1, 91).

The play's inbuilt attitudes to Jacobean society have also attracted attention. For example, the play's two women seem snugly to fit the misogynistic tastes of a (largely) male audience. Celia's 'white [ie insipid] innocence' suggests the play has no great interest in her character. Lady Pol, the other prominent female in the play, is 'the most finished and amusing female pedant which the stage ever produced' according to William Gifford, writing in 1818, who knew his bluestockings. Gifford is impressed because she confirms his prejudices. Volpone's onstage opinion is less tolerant. Soon after she calls him 'Volp!' he decides: 'The sun, the sea, will sooner both stand still / Than her eternal tongue' (3:2, 115-16). It is a nice question whether a positive feminist critique of this play is possible. Other topical bugbears in Volpone include the Puritans, so mealy-mouthed they cannot bring themselves to name the Mass, choosing to call their Christmas dinner 'Nativity-pie' (1:1, 135). Jonson, with the hint of exasperation customary with him, also satirises the contemporary fascination with prodigies and wonders, such as the 'fires at Berwick / And the new star' (2:1, 36-37) which also finds its way into Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), but is handled more gently there; and the addiction of Londoners to quackery of all kinds, such as Sir Pol's mad scheme for quarantining plague-ships with onions (4:1, 112-126), or his description of a system by which state secrets may be exchanged in pieces of fresh fruit (2:1, 70-75).

AO4 Social and political contexts

Jonson's 'Learned Sock'

Then to the well-trod stage anon
If Jonson's learned sock be on
(Milton, 'L'Allegro', ll. 131-32)

John Milton's poem about pleasure, 'L'Allegro' (1645), praises Jonson for the learnedness and classical basis of his comedy (the 'sock' is a light shoe worn by ancient comic actors). Jonson would have thought the younger poet on cue. The Preface to Jonson's Quarto edition of *Volpone* had already proclaimed his classical sympathies as an artist, and much of the play's inspiration is easily traced to the Roman shelves in his library. The play's basic theme, legacy-hunting, is not a fixation of Jacobean literature, but was a staple of the Latin comedies of Terence and Plautus, though R B Parker's edition (see below) also tracks down close parallels in Horace's *Satires* 2.5, Juvenal, Pliny, Petronius's *Satiricon* and selections from Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*. Several other episodes and speeches in *Volpone*, including Nano's interlude and *Volpone*'s opening oblation, are also closely based on classical models, as is the printed play's explicit division into five acts, even though the text would have been given continuously on an open stage with act breaks un-marked. Moreover Jonson calls his work 'a poem', rather than a play, indicating that this was not simply a disposable script, but a work of literature. He commends it to both ancient universities, where classical studies formed the mainstay of the curriculum, and where *Volpone* seems to have been performed with some success. It should be noted that Mosca's great soliloquy in 3:1 is essentially about the value of imitating – and perhaps outdoing – worthy originals.

One of the effects of Jonson's neoclassical sympathies was that his dramas were expected to follow the three Unities of place (one city), persons (by which he seems to mean one plot) and time (no more than twenty four hours). Aristotle is often credited with formulating these 'rules' but they are more likely to reflect evolving practice based on his arguments, and they were not fully articulated until the French neo-classicists, later than Jonson's time.

Since the opening of a permanent professional theatre in London in the late 1570s English dramatists had routinely 'stretched' the unities, a practice deplored by classically trained critics such as Sir Philip Sidney. Marlowe was guilty in *Edward II* of compressing an action of twenty-three years into an afternoon's entertainment; Shakespeare and Wilkins allow the action of *Pericles* to wander across two generations and the whole Mediterranean basin; Middleton and Rowley present two side-by-side plots in *The Changeling* that barely cohere. These effects were made possible by the unlocalised Elizabethan stage. Jonson declares in his Prologue to *Volpone* that the Unities were 'needful rules' and he does not mean to 'swerve' from them. He thought *Pericles*, which apparently did good box-office, a 'mouldy tale', and is clearly aiming at Shakespeare's deplorable licence in his Prologue to *Every Man in his Humour*:

To make a child now swaddled, to proceed
Man, and then shoot up, in one beard and weed,
Past threescore years; or, with three rusty swords
And help of some few-foot or half-foot words,
Fight over York and Lancaster's long jars,
And in the tiring-house bring wounds to scars.

Jonson regularly reminds us of the swift progress of time in his own play, from the morning opening of *Volpone*'s shrine to his midnight catastrophe. He makes the intimacy of his setting a virtue: three or four spaces (particularly the bedroom where *Volpone* sleeps, dreams and hatches his designs) embody the domestic web of sordid aspiration that constitutes almost all we can see of Venice. The action, too, is compressed (and contained) by inward-looking prompts and prods from those vicarious dramatists *Volpone* and *Mosca*, who more than once draw attention to the metatheatricality of their calling, plays packed inside plays, plot compressed within plot.

Continued

Only the sub-plot of Sir Politic and Peregrine does not fit the requirements of the Unities. (Lady Would-be's role can be contained within the Unities as she has designs on Volpone's 'chastity' and wealth). Consequently much of negative criticism the play has attracted over the years has been directed at Sir Pol, who seems, for some critics, superfluous to Jonson's design. Peter Whalley in 1756 thought he was 'brought in merely to lengthen out the play.' It must be conceded that Sir Politic is often singled out as the weakest point in a weak production, and that the great French satirist Nicholas Boileau thought the device of Sir Pol creeping about under a giant tortoise-shell rather coarse for a dramatist of Jonson's aspirations:

When in the Fox I see the tortoise hist
I lose the author of the Alchemist.

It seems a good move to over-cast the role, as Peter Hall did with John Gielgud in 1977, or Lindsay Posner with deadpan David Collings at Stratford in 1999. The more Sir Pol draws attention to himself, and the Wodehousian carapace of his Englishness, his fussy insistence, as C.H. Herford suggests, will seem to match his ultimate irrelevance. Besides, though the links are sometimes tenuous, his ignorance, and (ultimately) his vulnerability to Peregrine's uncompromising revenge, do mirror larger issues of incomprehension and duplicity in the play. For a classic account of the links between Sir Politic and the main plot, see Jonas A Barish, 'The Double Plot in Volpone' (1953). Barish argues 'the final unshelling of the tortoise [is] a parallel to the uncasing of the fox in the last scene' (reprinted in Macmillan Casebook, see below).

AO2 Renaissance neoclassicism;
structure of drama
AO3 Impact of sub-plot in theatre
AO4 Context of Classical Literature

Sympathy for the Devil

In the theatre our final impression, in any case, is likely to be of Volpone's resilience. When he hoots out 'This is called mortifying of a fox,' he is possibly punning on a secondary meaning of 'mortifying': to hang the meat up, to make it riper, to improve it. For, as in the beast-fables of Reynard, the fox must always somehow escape, leaving just his skin behind for flaying, if we still feel disposed to exact revenge. In any case, the fox heals quickly enough to bound forward, free from chains, and beg the audience's favour in an epilogue. As Ronald Bryden puts it, Jonson constructs not a Shakespearean comedy, in which poetic dream dissolves into transformed reality, but five acts of bolting, whooping blank verse, 'a fox hunt, a yelping, bellowing run to earth, invigorating as an icy morning in the shires.'

This folkloric vitality is a gift for the actor playing Volpone. With a mixture of aesthetic vitality and a sort of needy Holmesian charm, he gets the audience to eat from his hand. He is less rapacious than Shakespeare's Richard III, nor is he a professional foe of God's universe, like Milton's Satan. On the contrary, he is disinterested, where they are morbidly acquisitive, roving above the sordid games of the 'captators' or legacy-hunters: 'The artist in him is stronger than the money-spinner', as David Cook puts it.

Even his most sordid scene, the attempted rape of pallid Celia, is buoyed by the assurance of the rich, sharp blank verse he is given, and the writing's curious distance from ordinary life, as if grubby repressed desires had suddenly acquired soaring intensity. Besides, Volpone's element, artistry, makes him a ringer for the playwright himself. As if often pointed out, Volpone abounds in plays within the main play: Mosca's interlude, which Volpone approves, his own excursion as that consummate staged con-man, the mountebank, the foxy coup to surprise Celia into bed, the lawyer's mechanical speeches to the onstage judge. Nothing is ever quite what it seems. A thread of self-criticism, or a director's note as to what to do next time, or a request for Mosca's opinion, flutters before us – the wavering of a conscientious artist, not the hammer-strokes of a coarse actor 'nailing' sordid gain. As he puts it at the beginning of the play, 'I glory/ More in the cunning purchase of my wealth/ Than in the glad possession.' (1:1, 30-32) In short Volpone's status as onstage locum for the playwright wins him friends. No-one ever wished Celia to get out from under his poetry too quickly, especially with a rich pastiche of Catullus's famous *carpe diem* love poem (3:7, 165ff) to back it up.

AO2 Impact of
Volpone's charm

Staging Volpone

Volpone was premiered successfully at the first Globe. This was a big theatre by modern standards, and would have attracted a large mixed audience. Sir John Davies's description emphasises the social inclusiveness at turning-out time: 'A thousand townsmen, gentlemen and whores, Porters and servingmen together throng . . .' Volpone might, at first glance, have seemed caviar to such a general following, but, then, critical history is littered with expressions of surprise as to how well Jonson's comedies play on stage. The combination of scenes written for a large ensemble of actors and technically complex diction can make them tough going in the study, but once set free and up-to-speed in the theatre, the overarching magic of Jonson's design appears. Less a purveyor of relaxed comedy than of supercharged farce, Jonson's humorous climaxes play sublimely, 'better than Shakespeare's', opined that great Jonson director Tyrone Guthrie.

Volpone is the most performed Early Modern play outside the Shakespeare canon. Quickly taken up by the Restoration theatres, Pepys thought it 'a most excellent play; the best I think I ever saw.' The play remained a darling of the repertoire until deep into the sentimental age, when its hard edges proved too much for softened sensibilities. Between 1786 and 1921 it received no professional performances, only to enjoy a triumphant return in the 1920s. Its dark humour and amoral characterisation suited the mood of the post-war world (the theatrical equivalent of an Evelyn Waugh novel?), not to mention that of Modernists like TS Eliot, who praised it to the rafters. Prestige productions followed one another down the remainder of the century, especially benefiting from modern rediscovery of the Elizabethan 'empty space' and of drama techniques which free theatre from the confines of the proscenium arch and fourth wall.

The first Volpone was Richard Burbage, leading actor of the King's Men, and the role has always attracted star performances. Cruel, loud and lyrical, Donald Wolfitt is probably the choice twentieth century Volpone, certainly the most discussed. His increasingly expansive performance was repeated at intervals between 1938 and 1953. Other Volpones, reacting against Wolfitt, were more punctilious and subdued – Paul Scofield, for instance, in 1977. The play returned regularly to both Stratford and London, often commanding big budgets and large casts, with real water in the canals and floating gondolas, as in George Devine's Stratford production of 1952, designed by Malcolm Pride. The wisdom of its recent theatre history is that Volpone makes light of a big stage but can become cramped in studio settings; that the title character is best when menacing, and Mosca when he does not steal the show; that the carrion-birds work well when more human than avian; that the Would-be's are never conspicuous by their absence; and that Celia should remain subdued, rather than be played against the text as brisk and priggish. Above all a good production must acquire lots of pace.

There is no sound recording of the play currently available, and nothing of value on Youtube. The Greenwich Theatre production on DVD (2010) solidly deploys limited resources and gives some glimpses of the text's potential, though it lacks pace and depth of casting. Volpone (Richard Bremmer) is a knowing voluptuary, Mosca (Mark Hadfield) a weary factotum, and the carrion birds bristle quite well. The Would-be's and the Monsters, however, are rather disappointing. Celia is oddly misconceived as a materialistic Irish matron. The film runs 159 minutes approx.

AO3 Different approaches
to the play in performance

Bibliography

There are two inexpensive one volume editions of the play, the Revels Student edition edited by R.B. Parker and David Bevington (the introduction is hard going at A2, but the bibliography is very useful) (1999) and the New Mermaids Second Edition, ed. Robert N. Watson (2007).

Jonas A. Barish, ed. *Jonson: Volpone* (Macmillan Casebook Series, 1972). This is still an excellent resource for critical essays and (especially) comments at A2.

Robert Dutton, Ben Jonson: *To the First Folio* (1983). Good introduction.

Stanley Wells, Shakespeare and Co (2006) looks at Shakespeare in relation to each of his major contemporaries, including Jonson. Profoundly learned but lightly and concisely written, this is an excellent resource at A2. It might be supplemented with the critically more incisive Simon Trussler, *Faber Guide to Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (2006). Sean McEvoy, Ben Jonson, Renaissance Dramatist (2008).

Matthew Steggle, ed., *Volpone: a Critical Guide* (2008). An uneven, polyphonic critical anthology, but Sam Thompson's account of the play's critical history is excellent. Good stage history, too, by Rebecca Yearling.

The Luminarium website offers a wide range of resources - including texts and essays - on Jonson and his time

<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/jonson/>

David W.Maurer, *The Big Con* (1940). This classic study of confidence tricksters offers many insights into both the psychology and presentation of Volpone and Mosca (and their victims).

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