

## **Volpone as a Non – Comedy**

Farida Chishti

Though Ben Jonson claims to present ‘quick comedy refined <sup>1</sup>’ in the Prologue to the play, we pause to contend the generally assumed status of Volpone as a comedy.

Jonson clearly enunciates the purpose of comedy in The Discoveries. It is

.....to create laughter to the end that man’s lesser faults may be made to appear ridiculous and so be avoided.....As tragedy works out its catharsis through pity and fear, so comedy achieves its aim, which is also ethical, by mockery of baseness and folly in their lesser degree.. by sporting with folly and not crime <sup>2</sup>

Jonson was not the only one to hold this belief. A little earlier, Sidney had already defined comedy as ‘an imitation of the common errors of life<sup>3</sup>.’ He was surely following Aristotle who defined these ‘common errors of life’ as ‘mistake or deformity which is “ridiculous” on the grounds that ‘it is not productive of pain or harm to others <sup>4</sup>. “

How far Jonson deviates from his own definition of comedy in Volpone is not hard to ascertain. In the name of comedy what we get here is not a series of harmless mistakes due to the ‘lesser faults of men.’ The faults are graver in their nature and repercussions. Folly is too light a word to cover the widespread moral disease and debasement rampant in the play’s Venice. There are cardinal sins such as pride, envy, covetousness, lechery, sloth and gluttony on the one hand, and on the other hand, heinous crimes like pimping, attempted

---

All textual reference from Ben Jonson, Three Comedies ed. Michael Jamieson, A Penguin International Edition, 1966.

prostitution and rape, illegal extortion of money and favor, perjury, felony etc. What a variety to choose from! Moreover all evil deeds of the Volpone-Mosca duo and the trio of their dupes emanate from essential, deep-seated evil tendencies rather than any temporary aberration in their behaviour. It is crime and sin and not folly, evil in human nature and not common errors of life which are Jonson's major preoccupations and he explores them with a ruthlessness quite uncharacteristic of a comic playwright.

Not that he was incapable of producing lighter, laughable material. His 'Masques' alone establish him as one of the most delightful comic writer of the age. Nor is Volpone devoid of funny situations. The machinations of greedy men, swindling, fleecing and finally destroying each other are good stuff for comedy. We laugh at Volpone when just after hoodwinking his suitors, he suffers at the hands of Lady Politic (III – IV). So must the effect of Voltore pretending to be possessed by the devil (V – XIII) be extremely funny on the stage. But such comedy is short lived. What follows is a reaction opposed to the comic pleasure. Anger, revolt, disgust and revulsion overtake the lighter spirits, leaving behind a pain too ponderous for comedy to bear.

The overall treatment of subject, themes and characters plus Jonson's style and tone--everything thwarts the comic expectations he raises both in the Dedication and the Prologue. His assurance is quite misleading:

All galls and copperas from his ink he draineth  
Only a little salt remaineth,  
Wherewith he'll rub your cheeks, till, red with laughter  
They shall look fresh a week after.

Prologue (33-6)

What he conveniently skips is the over-much of tart he uses along with just 'a little salt' so that we remain more depressed than fresh a week after. The fact is that Jonson was too morally conscious and

committed an artist to be bound by the rules of pleasure and entertainment alone. In *Volpone*, his deviation from comedy is so pronounced as to lead Herford to declare:

In its whole conception and conduct, in the lurid atmosphere which prevails it from the beginning to end, in the appalling and menacing character of the principal movers of the plot, it approaches not the profound and human hearted tragedies of Shakespeare but his own grandiose and terrible tragedy of two years before, *Sejanus*.<sup>5</sup>

This is not the only piece of criticism pairing *Volpone* with its savage predecessor<sup>6</sup> Considering it ‘too grim for comedy’, Goldberg opines that ‘though after writing a tragedy, Jonson returned in his own view to comedy, yet it is very difficult to accommodate it with any notion of comedy, classical or Elizabethan<sup>7</sup>’. Rightly so! For here as in *Sejanus*, we move in a dark, sinister world, beset with all types of crimes against man and God alike. Now, the forces of good and evil, virtue and vice are always a cause of dramatic conflict. The predominance and ultimate triumph of either determines the category of a play as comic or tragic. Never once in the history of both romantic and satiric traditions of comedy, has evil been allowed such an overwhelming stature as to steal the entire show. Granted, it has to be strong enough to disturb the balance. But finally it is defeated or discomfited at the hands of good. *Volpone*’s is a different case. Its most alarming feature is the exaggerated magnitude of evil at both individual and institutional levels. It is all -pervading, all-penetrating and its sheer weight and proportion is all the more terrifying because it is not countered by good of any solid mass or substance. Whatever good *Volpone* has is reduced to its minimal size and remains totally ineffectual throughout. The vicious remain strong and unbroken till the end and even when they are finally defeated, their rout doesn’t help the virtuous to rise in either their stature or our esteem. A definite blow to the play’s status as a comedy!

Coleridge thinks Volpone a good proof of how impossible it is to keep up any pleasurable interest in a tale in which there is no goodness of heart in any of the prominent characters. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> Act,' he continues, 'the play becomes not a dead but a painful weight on the feelings <sup>8</sup>.' Echoing him, A.C ward protests that 'it is impossible to enjoy a play whose prominent characters are so singularly devoid of goodness of heart <sup>9</sup>.' And for the same reason, Patridge asserts that 'comedy certainly is not appropriate for a play which creates such a profound sense of evil that the tone seems close to tragedy than to comedy <sup>10</sup>.'

True indeed! None of Jonson's comedies bears comparison with Volpone in its paramountcy of evil. The Alchemist too has its fair share of roguery. Its two swindlers are as resourceful as Volpone and Mosca. But the gulls they exploit are not thoroughly vicious like Corbaccio, Voltore and Rovino. In fact, most are more naïve than knaves. Nor do Face and Subtle perpetuate their villainy on idealistically virtuous figures like Celia and Bonario. Volpone is unprecedented in many respects. For one thing, the deliberate placement of its action in Renaissance Rome rather than Jacobean England is most unusual. This venue for Shakespeare's fantastic bond-and-casket story came to be a hotbed of 'Splendid Vice' 'for Jonson and his contemporaries. No other setting could be more appropriate' for the bizarre, the monstrous, the extraordinary sinister and intriguing. <sup>12</sup> In such an unbalanced and morally lopsided world, almost all the dramatis personae form en masse a hierarchy of scoundrels covering a large spectrum of social roles.' Never before had Jonson painted with so much power humanity denuded of every germ of good <sup>13</sup>.' In this fallen world of villains and sub-villains, greed, avarice and covetousness are the prime source of all action, 'perverting human nature. destroying its humanity, nullifying its intelligence and banishing all dignity and worth <sup>14</sup>.' This qualitative decline relegates them to a sub-human, bestial level as is reflected through the very names they bear – fox, fly, vulture, raven, crow, parrot etc.

What really pains and dispossess us is not simply the preponderance of evil but also its glamourisation in the person of Volpone. Instead of portraying him as a loathsome creature, Jonson takes care to imbue him with a grandeur seldom acquired by a comic villain. An evil genius, he is unmatched in cunning and intelligence, planning and execution. Even from behind the scenes, he superbly master-minds the drama of man-hunting for gold. And mind you, it is not so much gold that he hankers after but thrill and triumph of outwitting his petty rivals. And outclass them he does completely and indisputably. In the Venetian den of vices, he is not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill type of a swindler but a magnifico – both in social status and quality of vocational skill. Unlike the greedy, undignified ‘carrion-birds’ that circle around him, he is the fox, proverbially the most conniving of all creatures. In spirits, he remains unbowed till the end. Such magnificence hardly deserved by a comic villain, helps him cross the bounds of comedy and enter those of tragedy.

In the portrayal of Volpone’s character, Jonson has inverted all comic conventions. This is in line with the master-theme of the play --the tragic inversion of values – so well epitomized in the master-knave himself.

The play starts with Volpone comfortably nestled in his luxurious bed, enjoying the sight of his ill-gotten wealth. He casually rejects all normal things of life which do not go with his perverted taste, sense and sensibilities. Gold is his family, society, religion, god and all. It fulfills his emotional and psychological needs. So he can do without parent, wife, child or ally. Later, he owns that the outwitting of the court gives him greater thrill and enjoyment than if he had ‘enjoyed the wench.’(V ii 10). He appears bizarre, congratulating himself on his utterly barren existence. We get no consolation in the way he has built up his hoard: ‘why this is better than rob the church yet/or fat, by eating once a month a man.’(I v 91-2). More gold means more excitement hence there is no end to his pursuit of both.

Immensely resourceful, this hero-villain swings everyone round his little finger. One signal from him sends Mosca flying and buzzing off to carry out his errands. Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno are at his beck and call, staging a show for his entertainment at a minute's notice. He is the arch-hunter, squeezing the last dregs of morality from his prey, so that one is ready to discard and disinherit his own son, and the other to prostitute his wife. The ease and precision with which he executes his predatory designs against the innocent and the guilty alike is simply marvelous.

As the play proceeds, he appears more and more attractive. From a superb director and puppeteer behind the scenes, he proves himself an actor par excellence in the 'mountbank' scene (II. ii). The wooing of Celia adds a new dimension to his character. He is a super-refined sensualist who can tempt anyone but Celia to perdition. With Mosca by his side, he follows his unscrupulous projects without the slightest weight on his conscience. Not that he is not interrupted in his course. He is thrice discomfited. But the speed and alacrity with which he recovers is astonishing. Each time it is his own rivals who unwittingly add to his strength and stature. Comic though is the scene of his beating under Celia's window, we would have enjoyed it more, had not Corvino been so utterly crude a husband. Similarly, his temporary fall at the hands of Bonario does not perturb us much. A brain-less, spineless youth like Bonario stands no chance before our super duper. Volpone remains impressive throughout the play. Particularly admirable is the careless abandonment with which he embarks upon his second vicious venture involving his 'death'. He is equally magnificent in his final over-throw. Only he could have acted the way he does, unmasking himself and his fellow-knaves in the face of complete ruin to himself. A heroic career coming to a heroic end! Could anything be more perverse and comically unsatisfying? It is unfortunate but important that the evil pursuits of Volpone and Mosca are rich in comic yield. We keep on laughing frequently but certainly not in ease of heart and mind. Our laughter most of the time is diluted with guilt and dismay. We agree with Venables that 'Volpone makes us laugh a great deal yet we have no doubt of the evil nature of the action we are watching<sup>15</sup>'. The purpose is

definitely corrective. Volpone and Mosca are instruments in Jonson's hands to plague us,' writes Goldberg. 'It is our vision of the corrupt world he wants to create in such a way that we are able to reject it even when we possess it....Were we not tempted, our rejection would have no significance <sup>16</sup>.' Indeed, Jonson is too subtle an artist to give us the advantage of a straightforward, clearly defined and morally unambiguous position to enjoy. Instead, he leaves us in doubt about whether to laugh or cry at a particular scene. He wants us to feel uncomfortable. The very sense of guilt that we are laughing with the crooks instead of at them negates our total abandonment to comedy.

The crooks of the lower hierarchy symbolize the penetration of evil down to the very core of society. While the wickedest villains of Shakespeare show some touches of humanity, those of Jonson's are uni-dimensional, thoroughly debased and degenerate, calling for neither sympathy nor understanding. It is cause of concern for the critics that the play exclusively 'concentrates on the negatives. <sup>16</sup>' Though each of the dupes has his own separate social identity – Voltore is an attorney, Corbaccio, an old gentleman and Corvino, a merchant – they are bracketted together by an acquisition mania that turns them into monsters. Can monstrosity be a fit material for comedy? Here and there Jonson introduces certain grotesque elements in their characters, as for example Corbaccio's deafness and his claim to outlive the magnifico. But we can not share the crude and inhuman interest and pleasure each shows in Volpone's imminent death. Corvino is the most pernicious of the lot. At the prospect of inheritance, he takes no time to get out of his jealous rage and persuade Celia to lie with another man. Why, it would be 'a pious work,' mere charity' (III. vii) 65). Here perversity reaches, in Greg Smith's words, 'a pitch, unexpected in a comedy and... strikes the note of tragedy<sup>17</sup>.' Though Celia is saved in the nick of time but the grimness of the event has filled us with horror and revulsion -- emotions though not completely tragic, but certainly anti-comic. Far from being funny, the 'carrion-birds' repel us with their super abundant ability to exceed human limits. The unlimited possibilities of evil they convey is the real cause of our moral repugnance. Voltore's misuse of his power of advocacy is as

repulsive as Corvino's treatment of his wife as a bill of exchange with which to buy Volpone's favour. Equally revolting is Corbaccio's performance as a father. At the first sight of his own interest, he has no hesitation to disown his own son. Thanks to these instances of unnaturalness, comedy is not subordinated, it is negated. To quote Griffith:

All these characters are so ill-conditioned that they forbid the 'sporting' sympathy on which comedy by Jonson's own rule must rely. Their deeds are crimes rather than folly. The fox and his friends are never mere mischief-makers; they are villains of the stuff of which tragedy makes use but without the dignity conveyed in her treatment, playing with a natural frankness with no suggestion of the discrepancy between real and assumed character which gives comedy its great opportunity<sup>18</sup>.

As if the paramountcy of evil was not enough to turn Volpone into a non-comedy, Jonson aggravates the perversion of the situation through a parallel attenuation of good. That virtue should be so diminutive is thanks, in no small measure, to its own passivity, complacency and lack of courage and initiative. Representing good at individual level, both Celia and Bonario remain contended with their position as subordinates and victim. Orphan-like, they cower and cringe before their mighty tormentors. Bonario, in particular, is totally insipid. He conveniently replaces righteous action with an abstract ideal of obedience to his father. Celia, on the other hand, does gain our sympathy for her heroic resistance against the corrupt alliance of Corvino, Mosca and Volpone. But both their performance in the court scene is inimical to hospitable feelings. Instead of compassion, they earn our sneer. Another instance of perversity! For it is the innocent and the guiltless that the play makes us laugh at. Indeed, Jonson takes care that no character shall make a real claim on our esteem<sup>19</sup>, '\_\_\_ least of all, the virtuous one!

The first court proceedings, spread across three scenes (IV,iv,v,vi) mark the tragic climax of the play. For the first time in the play, we watch the total failure of man at individual and institutional level. The innocent and the guilty are brought face to face under the so-called protective wings of the judiciary. Moris Venables, calling it the most repellent scene,' sums it up thus, 'The vicious are seen at their worst; the virtuous, if Bonario may be held their representative – are foolishly feeble and the officers of justice are remarkably stupid and unjust <sup>20</sup>,' The guilty tighter their noose round the guiltless; the latter having no witness but heaven, which they naively believe 'never fails the innocent.'(IV vi 17). In the course of this absurd trial, all sorts of perversion reach their culmination. Voltore prostitutes his professional skill, Corbaccio disowns his son calling him 'monster of men, swine, goat, wolf, parricide' (IV.v 111-12). Corvino calls his wife 'a whore/of most hot exercise, more than a partridge' (IV.v. 115-6). Lady Politic's blundering testimony seals the fate of the innocent.They are put behind the bars; the rogues are allowed to go scot-free and the judges piously vent their horror at the 'unnaturalness' of the guiltless.

With justice thus perverted and honesty punished, the situation is too preposterous to be reconciled with comedy. The final resolution is equally anti-comic. It is brought about not by good at last asserting itself but by evil clashing with evil. Rather than submitting to the blackmail of his parasite, Volpone within seconds chooses to fall in his own trap. 'The fox shall here uncase,' (V xii. 86), he decides heroically. So far justice had been totally blind, not in its protective and punitive role but in tracing down the real sources of crime. Ironically, it is Volpone, the main culprit himself, who has to perform this act of judiciary. 'He throws off his disguise in a kind of precipitating gesture more often found in tragedy <sup>21</sup>.'

I am Volpone, this is my knave  
This, his own knave; this avarice's fool:  
This, a chimera of wittol, fool and knave....  
V. xiii. 89-91

When the punishment is awarded to him, he exclaims ‘this is called the mortifying of a fox.’(II. xii. 125). He is not dumbfounded like Sejanus. His wit, courage and complacency are still intact. In the words of Herford:

The character of Volpone oversteps the limits of the comic. His fall leaves us more disturbed than exhilarated... He is not a tragic figure to inspire our pity, and sinister though, he hardly inspires terror. He is not ultimately defeated, nor does he yield to circumstances. Far from having his spirits broken down, he retains a wonderful joie de vivre.. his magnificence he has never lost.<sup>22</sup>

In its sternness of catastrophe, Volpone borders on tragedy. Again, in violation of the comic convention the restoration of order at the end promises nothing in its wake. There is no eye-opening or enrichment of vision on the part of either good or bad character. We have the impression that good is going to remain as inert, bad as unrepentant and the just as blind as ever. To quote just one example is Celia’s plea of mercy for her abhorrent husband for which she is rightly snubbed by the 1<sup>st</sup> Avocatori: ‘you hurt your innocence, suing for the guilty.’(V. xii. 106)

As for the fate of the innocent, it is left hanging in the air. Bonario inherits Corbaccio’s fortune even when the later is still alive and Celia is returned to her father’s house with her dowry trebled. How ironical! In this money-conscious society there is no concept of virtue getting any reward other than the monetary one. No wonder, Coleridge desired a different handling: ‘A more delightful comedy might be produced by making Celia the ward or niece of Corvino instead of his wife and Bonario her lover <sup>23</sup>.’

With all creases apparently smoothed out, the judges now rise to the occasion to pronounce judgement, and final moralizing: ‘Mischief feed/ Like beasts till they be fat and then they bleed.’(VI. Xii.150-1). By fusing multiple images, the first Avocatori unwittingly touches upon some of the major themes of the play – gluttony,

bestiality, mischief, sickness and the necessity of blood letting. How far the nature of imagery itself determines the grim, anti-comic status of Volpone is apparent from the word go:

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

(I. i. 1-2)

The religious imagery contorted for this parodied morning hymn at once strikes us with the perverse, anti-Christian stance of the speaker --- ‘for in drama, man is the language he uses<sup>24</sup>.’ The God of the Old and New Testament has been supplanted by a metallic one-- gold. This acquisition and hoarding mania with its corroding and dehumanising impact had already been a major preoccupation of three other master artists of the age. Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice, Marlowe in The Jew of Malta and Spenser in The Cave of Mammon (The Faerie Queen, II.vii) had dealt with the same theme. But nowhere is the shock more painfully acute than here. ‘Barabus in The Jew of Malta in his counting house with heaps of gold before him does not shock our sensibilities as Volpone does kneeling before his idol at his shrine<sup>25</sup>.’ The unabashed mockery, irreverence and blasphemy continuing in the subsequent images like sun, day, chaos, father, son, relic etc. must be particularly shocking to the contemporary audience steeped in traditional religion and the divine culture of hierarchy inherited from the Middle Ages. The scene in its shock-effect is comparable to the opening of Macbeth where in a bid for total moral chaos, the three witches announce their perverted manifesto: Fair is foul and foul is fair.’(I.i. 1.11)

The deliberate distortion of the religious imagery in I.i sets the note of abortion of the whole ethical system through the debasement of classical, mythological and animal images occurring in the rest of the play. The next scene re-enacts the transmigration of soul, blurring all distinctions between man and god and man and beast. The performers themselves – the one, misshapen; the other, degenerate and the third, castrated – represent the stunted growth of

human personality dried of its physical, mental, emotional and spiritual resources. In its mish-mash of all images, the scene is painful as well as grotesque; provocative of laughter as well as tears.

With the omnipotence and omnipresence of evil manifest through both matter and manner, is it possible for a play to fully discharge its comic functions? In other words, is Volpone pleasing? One of the basic requirements of comedy, as of all literature, is that it should delight and please. We can not help having our reservations regarding the above question. In spite of the glitter of gold and sensuous extravaganza in Volpone's promise to Celia, the overall atmosphere remains dark and the mood, sinister and anti-festive. The world of Shakespeare is left for behind. Indeed trekking through Jonsonian wasteland is a terrifying experience – jarring to the nerves and damping to the spirit. Perhaps Jonson himself realised this. That's why he seems to have resorted to certain artificial, un-Jonsonian means in a bid to restore the comic balance. A consummate artist like him, working strictly on the classical lines can not be expected to flout one of the unities so openly. This is exactly what he has done in Volpone. He inserts into a farcical, apparently irrelevant underplot of the English knight and his lady. Why? As for his themes, he has thoroughly explored them in the main story. So he needs no re-enforcement in the Politic-Peregrine plot. Could there be any purpose for this redundancy?

Yes, of course! As one of the critics remarks:

Jonson's introduction of Sir Politic Would -be and his wife and Peregrine in a comic underplot with little or no connection with the main story is a confession and amends to comedy for giving in her name this unrelieved sketch of depravity<sup>26</sup>.

Another critic finds a similar justification when he says, 'The laughter caused by Sir Politic's absurd antics will include both amusement and derision and is a shrewd comic preparation for the more serious exposures of the main plot <sup>27</sup>.' Besides bringing

comic relief, the underplot serves as a source of distinction between the comic and the non-comic domains, between error and vice, folly and monstrosity through a contrast between the nature of both the aberrations.

The interlude of Nano, Androgyno and Castrone is another device said to lighten the excessively dark and somber mood of Volpone. It could be a funny spectacle for the Jacobeans but is quite tasteless for modern sensibilities. The fakes are a morbid reminder of the limited productivity of the perverted culture in the play. Far from being funny, they are ‘objects of charity than contempt’ they rather ‘disturb than divert’ and ‘instead of moving our mirth [they] excite our compassion<sup>28</sup>.’

In the bleak and grotesquely corrupt world of Volpone, normal streams of life are diverted off their course, negating all pleasures as could be derived from marriage, inter-family relationships, pride in man’s honour and woman’s virtue, respect of religious pursuits. Such features are enough for any work of art to lose its comic contours and become a non-comedy. Volpone is one such play.

**Notes:**

1. Ben Jonson, Volpone, (A penguin international edition, 1966), p.50.
2. Ben Jonson, The Discoveries as qtd by Gregory Smith, Ben Jonson, (Macmillan 1975), p.89.
3. Sir Philip Sidney An Apologie for poetry, (Clarendon, 1961), p.30.
4. Aristotle, The Art of Poetry, (Fyfe, 1969). P.5.
5. C.H. Herford, Volpone or the fox, Ben Jonson, (Chatts & Windus Ltd. 1968), p. 61.
6. Ann Barton, Ben Jonson The Dramatist, (Camb. University. Press, 1986), p.127
7. C. H. Herford, *ibid*.
8. S.T. Coleridge, Literary Remains, Case Bk: Volpone, (Macmillan, 1964), p.30

9. A.C. Ward as qtd. By E.B. Patridge, The Broken Compass, (Chatto & Windus Ltd. 1964), p. 29.
10. E.B. Patridge, The Broken Compass, *ibid*
11. Gregory Smith, Ben Jonson, 20<sup>th</sup> C Views (Prentice Hall, Inc; N.J.)
12. Vincent F. Hopper & Gerald B. Lahey, Introduction to Volpone, (Barron's Educ. Series, NY, 1956)
13. C.H. Herford, *ibid*.
14. Moris Venables, Volpone and the Alchemist, (Basil Blackwell Oxford, 1970).
15. *Ibid*
16. S.L. Goldberg, Folly into Crime, Ben Jonson, (Macmillan Casebook, 1964)
17. Gregory Smith, *ibid*.
18. *Ibid*
19. Moris Venables, *ibid*
20. C.H. Herford, *ibid*, p. 81
21. *Ibid*
22. S.T. Coleridge, *ibid*.
23. E.B. Patridge, *ibid*
24. *Ibid*.
25. W. Griffith, qtd by Barish, introduction to Ben Jonson Case book, Series (Macmillan)
26. Moris Venables, *ibid*
27. W. Congreere, Dedication to The Way of the World, (Hill & Wang Inch. 1956), p. 291.