

**P.G DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
MAHARAJA COLLEGE, ARA
VOLPONE-CRITICAL ANALYSIS
P.G. SEM-I**

Ben Jonson wrote Volpone during the Jacobean period. Being a parody on societal standards, or commedia dell'arte, it embodies the ethos of the time. The Elizabethan era saw the amicable resolution of disputes between the Catholics who held the Pope in high regard and the puritanical reformists who aimed to reform the Church of England. The Elizabethan religious order aimed to preserve a close harmony between strict religiosity and the ascendancy of the pope. Ben Jonson incorporated some of these concepts into the stories of his plays because he was writing during a time when science, philosophy, and new religious interpretations were all the rage.

Jonson's plays have a didactic appeal that betrays his strong interest in classical literature. Because of his love of the classics, Jonson adopted the pretentious belief that comedies were meant to be moralizing. His plays were fashioned after ancient Greek and Roman tragedies. Because of his devotion to traditional theatrical models, Jonson was unable to explore the form and genre of theatre. Instead of becoming "round characters" who changed over the intricate plot, his characters stayed "types." The drama's characters behave predictably and serve as "types," faithful to their inherent nature. The audience is able to relate to Jonson's characters without having to deal with the psychological struggles of tragic heroes. Despite being William Shakespeare's contemporaries, Ben Jonson's plays did not receive the same critical praise as Shakespeare's. But while Shakespeare's plays were based on well-known classics and tales or drew inspiration from important historical events, Jonson's works were renowned for being unique. The publication of Volpone in 1605 further demonstrates Jonson's roots as a dramatist in both the Elizabethan and early Jacobean traditions.

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P.G. SEM-I**

Volpone's intention was "to teach and to delight," as the character names make clear. Animal and human characteristics are blended by Jonson, who develops the plot as a fable and emphasizes the animal above the human. The names are primarily Italian: Volpone, the main character, represents "fox," Mosca, who is a hybrid of a slave and a servant, represents "fly," Voltore represents "vulture," Corbaccio represents "raven," and Corvino represents "crow." The only character with human characteristics is called Bonario, which translates to "charitable." The list of the dramatis personae is organized like a hierarchical depiction of creative images, starting with little characters like the dwarf "Nano" and progressing to Volpone, the fox, who embodies a more intricate combination of human deceit and animal cunning. Castrone symbolizes a castrated male, whereas Androgyno signifies the complex blending of "man-woman" features in one individual. Jonson's skill in combining these characters—and occasionally the director-in-characters, like Volpone and Mosca—presents a unique blend of artistic and self-reflexive components in theatre. This also explains why Volpone appears notably absent in Act IV of the play, with Mosca taking his place. Volpone's plot is organized so that "The Argument" comes before the Prologue. The play's argument begins with a remark on Volpone's childlessness. Similar to the Prologue in the plays of Greek dramatist Menander, the Argument in Ben Jonson's plays provides us with background information about the play. Volpone is shown in The Argument as a cunning and uncaring individual. Volpone is presented as a run-down elderly guy who takes great pleasure in tricking the legacy-hunters:

Volpone, childless, rich, fains sick, despairs,

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*Offers his state to hopes of several heirs,
Lies languishing*

Volpone has no children to pass down his fortune to. He pretends to be ill in order to create the appearance that he is looking for a potential heir to his fortune. The act of hunting after a bequest suggests Volpone's suppressed wish to conceive a son who would inherit his fortune. The fact that he has no descendants fuels his schemes since it has made him feel insecure. The only devious act he can pull off with grace is to appear to be sick and bedridden because his advanced age has made him more susceptible. He seeks to provide himself with "security" for the future by accumulating wealth.

Because the legacy seekers are also not credulous, Volpone exposes himself in his attempt to expose the legacy-hunters. The play's undercurrent is replete with references to the issue of "appearance and reality." Their deceit is thrown back on them as heirs, hoping to inherit Volpone's wealth. There is deceit on both ends. The legacy hunters try to trick Volpone and Mosca, and the legacy hunters try to trick them back. Voltore faces trial and punishment as a result of his ineffective attempt to trick the court. Assuming Volpone is elderly and unable to fend for himself, Corvino is prepared to seduce him by offering him his own wife for a night. Corbaccio, is lured into risking his son's entire fortune, thinking that in return he would multiply gains. In reality, he is left with an even lesser fortune. Volpone sets about deceiving everyone, except Mosca, who in turn, deceives Volpone. Deception is lost on all the characters, except Mosca. This becomes evident when Volpone gives in to Mosca's plot.

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In the play's Act 1, Scene 1, Volpone extols the virtues of gold. Gold is regarded by him as his "son." His need to accumulate gold is a reflection of his obsessive-compulsive need to improve his financial situation because he is childless and elderly. This can even be seen in the metaphors and phrases of speech that Volpone chooses to use:

*o, thou son of Sol
(Much brighter than thy father) let me kiss -
With adoration, thee, and every relic
Of sacred treasure in this blessed room*

Personifying gold turns into a self-aware parallel for Volpone. Being childless, Volpone views himself as his father's "successor" rather than as a father to any children, which may put him in a position of accountability. Because he has been able to amass more fortune than his father had left for him, he believes that by manipulating the legacy hunters, he is superior to his father (because gold is 'brighter' than its father). He enjoys the luxury of living off the money he obtained through cheating, all by himself, without having to share it with anyone, because he is childless. For Volpone, "sharing" is the same as losing.

It turns out that Volpone is a "comedy of humours," as opposed to a "comedy of manners." The models of virtue and vice that the characters embody are referred to as humors. Based on the belief that the human body was composed of four humours, namely blood, choler, phlegm, and melancholia, medieval philosophers portrayed human personalities as either sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, or melancholic, depending on the humour. Jonson became an expert in the humor of humours by creating

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VOLPONE-CRITICAL ANALYSIS
P.G. SEM-I**

characters who fit certain "types." Because the humours are out of sync, there is an unsettling impact and a lack of order, which leads to comedy. Comedy is generated as the humours are not in sync, and hence the comic effect, and the lack of order. This lack of balance on the physical plane is embodied in the characters of Nano, Castrone and Androgyno, whereas the cerebral challenges are evident in Volpone, Voltore, Corvino, Corbaccio and Mosca.

The play's subplot is important since it has a number of supporting characters, including Peregrine, Lady Politic, and Sir Politic. The main plot and the subplot are connected thematically. In the subplot, greed and credulity are equally on display. Elizabethan dramaturgy typically featured subplots that presented important characters in fresh ways. Volpone's subplot presents a cast of new characters. The evil characters receive punishment from the judges. Jonson parodies accepted societal mores.

When Mosca eventually wins the whole money, the judges respect him, to the point where one of them is prepared to marry him and his daughter. He receives severe punishment after coming to the realization that he is truly impoverished. Mosca's assertion that all wise men are parasites is actually supported by the judges, who treat him with respect up until the point that they believe they may obtain pecuniary gain from him. In the end, Celia and Bonario stand out, and Jonson takes care to deliver a didactic but clear message—that virtue and tenacity triumph over vice. At the play's conclusion, Volpone, in his role as a trickster, displays a certain stoic resignation as he remarks, "this is called mortifying of a fox," acknowledging the harsh truth that lies ahead.

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