The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

Insights is published by the Utah Shakespeare Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

Copyright © 2011, Utah Shakespeare Festival. Please feel free to download and print Insights, as long as you do not remove any identifying mark of the Utah Shakespeare Festival.

For more information about Festival education programs:
Utah Shakespeare Festival
351 West Center Street
Cedar City, Utah 84720
435-586-7880
www.bard.org.

Cover photo: Jeanne Homer (left) as Gobbo and Richard Kinter as Volpone in Volpone, 1991.
Volpone

Contents

Information on the Play

Synopsis 4
Characters 5
About the Playwright 6

Scholarly Articles on the Play

Rare, Ingenious Knavery 7
A Study of Contradictions 9
Food for Thought 11
Synopsis: Volpone

Volpone, childless and rich, and his servant and parasite, Mosca, are playing a cunning and farcical game of deceit with three supposed friends who have each set their sights on becoming Volpone’s sole heir. Volpone, although healthy, feigns deathly illness to urge the three to shower him with valuable gifts in hopes of gaining his favor, and soon his money.

Mosca assures each hopeful donor that each is the one whom Volpone has honored in an alleged will. First comes Voltore, whom Mosca promises is the sole heir. Next comes Corbaccio, whom Mosca advises to go home, disinherit his own son, and leave his fortune to Volpone. In return for this generous deed, Volpone, soon to die, would leave his fortune to Corbaccio, whose son would benefit eventually. Finally comes Corvino, whom Mosca convinces should have his wife sleep by Volpone’s side, supposedly as a cure, but more likely as enough excitement to finally bring on the demise of the old man. Finally, Mosca tells Bonario, Corbaccio’s son, that his father is about to disinherit him, and he promises to lead Bonario to a place where he can witness his father’s betrayal.

The hilarity mounts even further with Lady Politick Would-Be, who is so talkative Volpone fears she will make him sick in actuality. To relieve his master’s distress, Mosca tells the lady that her husband is riding off in a gondola with a young girl, and jealous Lady Would-Be hurries off in pursuit.

Volpone retires to a private closet, while Mosca leads Bonario behind a curtain so the young man can spy on his father. At that moment, eager to win favor with Volpone, Corvino arrives with Celia, and Mosca has to send Bonario off to another room so he can deal privately with Corvino.

Corvino has promised his wife that Volpone is too old to harm her and insists that she lie with the old fox. Yet, when Corvino leaves, Volpone leaps from his couch and attempts to force himself upon her. Bonario reappears just in time to save her, and Mosca and Volpone, in terror of exposure, bewail their ruined plot.

They are interrupted by Corbaccio, whom Mosca assures of Volpone’s forthcoming death. Voltore interrupts this, and Mosca assures him that he is attempting to get possession of Corbaccio’s money so that Voltore will inherit more from Volpone. Mosca further explains that Bonario had mistaken Celia’s visit and had burst upon Volpone and threatened to kill him. Taken in by Mosca’s lies, Voltore, a lawyer, promises to keep Bonario from accusing Volpone of rape and Corvino of villainy; he orders the young man arrested.

In court the comedy twists tighter when Mosca proceeds with this case by having Corvino and Corbaccio testify against Celia and Bonario, while he whispers to the avaricious old gentlemen that they are helping “justice.” To add to the testimony, Mosca presents Lady Would-Be, who tells the court she has seen Celia beguiling Sir Politick in a gondola. Mosca, of course, promises Lady Would-Be that her name would stand first on Volpone’s list of heirs.

When the trial is over, Volpone sends his servants to announce that he is dead and that Mosca is his heir. Mosca then greets all the spurned men as he sits in Volpone’s house, supposedly taking inventory. Volpone, in the meantime, disguises himself as a commodore, in hopes of escaping from Venice with his loot.

However, having lost his hopes for the inheritance, Voltore begins to unwittingly unravel the plot. He withdraws his false testimony, and the court orders Mosca to appear. Suspecting that Mosca plans to keep the fortune for himself, Volpone also goes to the court, where he exposes to the court the foolish behavior of Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore, as well as the innocence of Celia and Bonario. The court sentences each conspirator, including Volpone and Mosca, according to the severity of his crime. Bonario is restored to his father’s inheritance, and Celia is allowed to return to her father because Corvino has attempted to barter her honor for wealth.
Characters: Volpone

VOLPONE: “the fox,” a wealthy magnifico with no heirs, unscrupulous and crafty, and plotting against those who would be his heirs
MOSCA: “the blow fly,” Volpone's parasite and equally-crafty servant
VOLTORE: “the vulture,” an advocate, and a would-be heir of Volpone
CORBACCIO: “the raven,” an old gentleman, father of Bonario, and a would-be heir of Volpone
CORVINO: “the crow,” a merchant, husband of Celia, and would-be heir of Volpone
AVOCATORI: four magistrates
NOTARIO: the register
NANO: a dwarf and servant of Volpone
CASTRONE: a eunuch and servant of Volpone
ANDROGYNO: a hermaphrodite and servant of Volpone
SIR POLITIC WOULD-BE: “the parrot,” a foolish knight and husband to Madame Would-Be
PEREGRINE: “the falcon,” a gentleman traveler
BONARIO: a young gentleman and son of Corvino
MADAME WOULD-BE: foolish wife of Sir Politic Would-Be
CELIA: beautiful wife of Corvino
COMMANDADORI: officers
MERCATORI: three merchants
SERVITORE: a servant
The Playwright: Ben Johnson

From Insights, 1991

Ben Jonson is possibly the only English dramatist of his day who may claim to rank with Shakespeare. A superbly gifted writer with intellectual energy, literary acumen, and command of language, much of his energy was consumed in literary wrangles with contemporary writers, most of whom he despised as uneducated hacksters, including, sometimes, Shakespeare.

Born in Westminster, England, in 1572, he studied under William Camden at Westminster School where he learned the classics, before he was deprived of continuing the university education he desired when his stepfather apprenticed him to his own trade of bricklaying. Finding this intolerable, he rebelled and instead went off as a soldier in the Netherlands. Upon his return in 1597, Jonson joined the London stage as an actor and part-author for one show, then found his niche as a writer. His first comedy to be presented at the Globe Theatre had Shakespeare in the cast, playing Knowell, in Every Man in His Humour. This play, presented in 1598, established Jonson’s reputation, and he followed it with a series of satiric comedies which left an enduring mark upon the development of English dramatic literature.

Jonson's best work was done in the ten years from the production of Volpone in 1606 to that of The Devil Is an Ass in 1616, the failure of the latter causing his retirement from the public stage for some years. It was not until 1625, when he had lost court patronage, that Jonson again wrote for public presentation, but the subsequent works were not on a level with his previous works and are little known.

There is a further aspect of Jonson’s dramatic work which cannot be ignored the fine series of court masques, an entertainment which in his hands reached the summit of its excellence. The young Prince Henry appeared in the title role of one of these Oberon, the Faery Prince, shortly before his death in 1611.

Jonson was continually in trouble because he was hot-headed and quarrelsome and was sent to prison three times. Isle of Dogs in 1597, in which Jonson was an actor and part-author, so incensed the authorities that they closed the theatres and put Jonson in prison. He found himself in trouble again in 1603 over his first tragedy, Sejanus, which the authorities judged seditious. Reflections on James I’s Scottish policy in Eastward Ho! in 1605 again resulted in Jonson landing in prison.

Jonson died in 1637 and is buried in Westminster Abbey, where his stone bears the famed epitaph reflecting the high opinion in which he was held: “O Rare Ben Jonson.”

Major Works
1598: *Every Man in His Humour*
1599: *The Case Is Altered and Every Man out of His Humour*
1600: *Cynthia’s Revels*
1601: *The Poetaster*
1603: *Sejanus*
1604: *Eastward Ho!*
1606: *Volpone*
1609: *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman*
1610: *The Alchemist*
1611: *Cataline*
1614: *Bartholomew Fair*
Most Elizabethan theatre audiences had seen and enjoyed Shakespeare’s 1604 tragedy, Othello, the Moor of Venice. Upon viewing Ben Jonson’s 1606 comedy, Volpone, or The Foxe, these same audiences might well have noted both similarities and differences in the treatment of material set against the background of a city noted alike for its magnificence and its vice.

In both plays, we meet characters of “rare ingenious knavery.” Indeed, Iago, Volpone, and Mosca are uncommonly similar in nature. An elaborate “con game” is practiced in each play through intriguing dramatic inventiveness. However, the focus of Shakespeare’s tragedy is upon a noble and heroic figure; the focus of Jonson’s comedy is upon a monster of depravity, a genius in crime.

Comparisons between these great plays continues to pale when Jonson’s script is held up to scrutiny. Whereas Shakespeare’s seventeenth century work in comedy would turn continually toward soft edges, romance, and the pastoral, mixing both the serious and the humorous, Jonson established a reputation as one of the major social satirists of the English dramatic tradition. In fact, Jonson’s comedies establish the tradition of social comedy on the English stage. In Volpone, although the satire is ultimately moral, its immediate aim is mostly social or legal. The play unmasks the artificial features of respectability, exposing vice and the manipulations of hypocrites. To his credit, Jonson did not altogether excuse the imperceptiveness of the victims in the play. Jonson’s central characters are among the early models of “anti-heroes,” a term generally restricted to characters found in Dostoevski, Sartre, or Camus. The specimens dramatized in Volpone are not merely fools, but money-hungry, lustful, morally despicable knaves. Their names immediately suggest their depravity because they are identified with the world of beasts. Thus, the lawyer, Voltore, is named for the vulture, the deaf old Corbaccio for the raven, the violet Corvino for the crow, the parasitical Mosca for the fly, and the sly, scheming Volpone for the wily fox. This kind of deception continues to the purely comic characters of the subplot: the Knight Sir Politic Wouldbe, a wholly gullible social climber, is reduced to Sir Pol, the parrot; his wife, Lady Politic Wouldbe, chatters endlessly in the manner of the parrot; and the traveler, Peregrine, is named for a hunting falcon. Only Celia and Bonario escape animal imagery, but they are morally typed by their names (Celia means heavenly and Bonario means good-natured).

The wicked central character, Volpone, is incapable of either generosity or self-knowledge. He only fails in his greedy aspirations because of the tendency of vice to overreach itself. In the play, the mainly passive, virtuous characters are practically defenseless against scoundrels cloaked in propriety and skilled in legal dodging. The good-natured guardians of the law are dull-witted, and the true innocents, Bonario and Celia, finally escape only because the knaves ensnare themselves. If the laws of the state are vindicated, it is a hollow victory.

The comic ploy of man pretending to be sick was common in drama. (Later, Moliere would use a variation on this theme in his last great comedy, The Imaginary Invalid, produced at the Utah Shakespeare Festival in 1989.) Ultimately, the plot of Volpone turns into tricking the trickster. Volpone’s pretended illness gathers the gulls around him, waiting for his death and the chance to

Volpone “Rare Ingenious Knavery”
From Midsummer Magazine, 1991

Most Elizabethan theatre audiences had seen and enjoyed Shakespeare’s 1604 tragedy, Othello, the Moor of Venice. Upon viewing Ben Jonson’s 1606 comedy, Volpone, or The Foxe, these same audiences might well have noted both similarities and differences in the treatment of material set against the background of a city noted alike for its magnificence and its vice.

In both plays, we meet characters of “rare ingenious knavery.” Indeed, Iago, Volpone, and Mosca are uncommonly similar in nature. An elaborate “con game” is practiced in each play through intriguing dramatic inventiveness. However, the focus of Shakespeare’s tragedy is upon a noble and heroic figure; the focus of Jonson’s comedy is upon a monster of depravity, a genius in crime.

Comparisons between these great plays continues to pale when Jonson’s script is held up to scrutiny. Whereas Shakespeare’s seventeenth century work in comedy would turn continually toward soft edges, romance, and the pastoral, mixing both the serious and the humorous, Jonson established a reputation as one of the major social satirists of the English dramatic tradition. In fact, Jonson’s comedies establish the tradition of social comedy on the English stage. In Volpone, although the satire is ultimately moral, its immediate aim is mostly social or legal. The play unmasks the artificial features of respectability, exposing vice and the manipulations of hypocrites. To his credit, Jonson did not altogether excuse the imperceptiveness of the victims in the play. Jonson’s central characters are among the early models of “anti-heroes,” a term generally restricted to characters found in Dostoevski, Sartre, or Camus. The specimens dramatized in Volpone are not merely fools, but money-hungry, lustful, morally despicable knaves. Their names immediately suggest their depravity because they are identified with the world of beasts. Thus, the lawyer, Voltore, is named for the vulture, the deaf old Corbaccio for the raven, the violet Corvino for the crow, the parasitical Mosca for the fly, and the sly, scheming Volpone for the wily fox. This kind of deception continues to the purely comic characters of the subplot: the Knight Sir Politic Wouldbe, a wholly gullible social climber, is reduced to Sir Pol, the parrot; his wife, Lady Politic Wouldbe, chatters endlessly in the manner of the parrot; and the traveler, Peregrine, is named for a hunting falcon. Only Celia and Bonario escape animal imagery, but they are morally typed by their names (Celia means heavenly and Bonario means good-natured).

The wicked central character, Volpone, is incapable of either generosity or self-knowledge. He only fails in his greedy aspirations because of the tendency of vice to overreach itself. In the play, the mainly passive, virtuous characters are practically defenseless against scoundrels cloaked in propriety and skilled in legal dodging. The good-natured guardians of the law are dull-witted, and the true innocents, Bonario and Celia, finally escape only because the knaves ensnare themselves. If the laws of the state are vindicated, it is a hollow victory.

The comic ploy of man pretending to be sick was common in drama. (Later, Moliere would use a variation on this theme in his last great comedy, The Imaginary Invalid, produced at the Utah Shakespeare Festival in 1989.) Ultimately, the plot of Volpone turns into tricking the trickster. Volpone’s pretended illness gathers the gulls around him, waiting for his death and the chance to
inherit his considerable wealth. The extremes to which the gulls are willing to go are cruel and unnatural: disinheriting a son and prostituting a wife. The subjects and the language in the play are dark. Gold is not only an object to achieve, but a substitute for God. Also, Volpone emphasizes disease and physical degeneration as a metaphor for moral illness. A seemingly irrelevant academic skit is enacted by a dwarf, a eunuch, and a hermaphrodite. In disguise, Volpone releases a diatribe aimed as much at burlesquing itinerant quacks as at advancing his designs on Celia. The English travelers are caught in an almost independent farce of their own. In the unraveling of the main plot, Jonson risks anticlimax by launching, as late as the final act, a brilliant new set of complications. Such craft may seem flawed. The fertility of this inventiveness is rich, but not disordered. Volpone, aided by Mosca, ensnares everyone around him. The lesser predators (vulture, raven, crow) are motivated by avarice as they drag along the less guilty, these merely foolish are altogether innocent. Perhaps Sir Politic Would-be, replete with his minor schemes and pretentious information, in some ways stands as a parody of Volpone. The men share equally appropriate justice. At the end of the play, the false sickness of Volpone is converted to real pain and all of his money goes to the incurables, of which, spiritually, he is one.

The play demonstrates a wonderful principle of thematic integration. Jonson relentlessly explores the idea of hypocrisy as the mask of lust and of lust as perversion of human nature. Avarice is everywhere: possessing possessions and being possessed! The perversity and deceptiveness of lust is constantly dramatized by use of tricks and transformations. The themes mix. Volpone's lust for gold leads him to deception and rhetoric well beyond the reach of the victims. Mosca, equally as lustful as Volpone, caters to Volpone's lust for Celia. Mosca thereupon impersonates a mountebank, the symbol of greed and lies. The deformed and mutilated servants of Volpone make sport of greed, hypocrisy, and perversion in order to please their master. Finally, Volpone attempts to transform Celia into a prize possession. This is a major crisis in the turn of Volpone's fortunes. Thereafter his vicious talents diminish and he becomes more and more exposed. By the final scene of the play, almost every character uses the word “possession” until it culminates in a definition: possessed by demons, whereupon final transformations reveal the truth. As a desperate, eleventh hour device, Volpone removes his last disguise in order to pull all the hypocrites down in his own ruin. Virtue is barely saved by the virtuosity of Jonson. Yet, the play is a comedy. While characters are morally convulsive and disturbing, the deceptions and self-deceptions are also theatrically entertaining. Happy are the actors who have the opportunity to create the role of Volpone and Mosca. For example, in the great Guthrie Theatre Company production in Minneapolis in 1964, Douglas Campbell performed a riotous Volpone, matched by George Grizzard’s Mosca, Lee Richardson’s Sir Politic Would-be, and Ken Ruta’s Voltore (Mr. Ruta won acclaim as Titus Andronicus in the 1990 Utah Shakespeare Festival season). Volpone gets to perform as an invalid, a mountebank, a seducer, and an officer. Mosca continually plays a triple role as “concerned” servant, willing helper of the greedy gulls, and the schemer enjoying his success. Remarkably, so attractive are these schemes in their improvisations and maneuvers, we are repeatedly led by Jonson’s skills to side with them against our better judgement! Indeed, we readily give the fox the applause he asks for at the end! And why not, remembering that this is theatre and make-believe. It is entertainment, as well as instructive concerning the foibles of men and women. Thus, again reminding us of Shakespeare, Jonson’s brilliant craft captivates us and we heed well Volpone’s final words: “The seasoning of a play is the applause. / Now, though the Fox be punish’d by the laws, / He yet doth hope, there is no suff’ring due, / For any fact which he hath done ’gainst you; / If there be a censure him; here he doubtful stands. / If not, fare jovially, and clap your hands.”
Volpone and Jonson:
A Study in Contradictions

By Ace G. Pilkington
From Insights, 1991

Ben Jonson, rival and friend of Shakespeare, was a study in contradictions. Acknowledged as poet laureate and founder of a “school” of poets who called themselves the “Sons of Ben,” he preached writing according to rules, including the so-called classical (or Aristotelian) unities. As Jonson says of himself in the Prologue to Volpone, “The laws of time, place, persons he observeth.” He was the careful kind of poet who wrote out what he meant to say in prose and then “translated” it into verse.

In his life, on the other hand, he was anything but controlled. As a soldier in Flanders, he fought single-handed with an enemy in full view of the two armies, and killed him. Back in England, he refused to follow his stepfather’s profession of bricklayer, becoming instead an actor and playwright. He soon got into trouble: he was thrown into prison as the co-author of a supposedly seditious play called The Isle of Dogs, and he fought a duel with a fellow actor, killing him and escaping the hangman’s rope only by pleading the old law of “benefit of clergy.” This meant that he had to prove knowledge of Latin, something which in earlier times would have indicated he was a priest and therefore beyond the reach of the regular law. Jonson was branded on the thumb as a felon to prevent his using the “benefit of clergy” defense ever again. His quarrels with actors, audiences, and other writers continued throughout his career, but henceforth he fought with a pen and not a sword.

Volpone is Ben Jonson’s most popular play, and in some ways it was very much like its author, carefully controlled in principal but violent and quarrelsome in the message it sends. The first of Jonson’s works to please both the people and his own precise palate had been Every Man in His Humour, a play that used the then-accepted medical idea that each person is dominated by a “humour” or prevailing temperament.

This humour was supposed, in turn, to be the result of an excess of one of four bodily fluids: blood, choler, melancholy, or phlegm. Thus, in The Taming of the Shrew, Petruchio warns Kate against the eating of meat, “For in engenders choler, planteth anger” (IV.i.160). And in Henry V and The Merry Wives of Windsor, Shakespeare laughs at the whole idea (and perhaps at his friend Ben) with the character Nym, who cannot say two sentences without using the word “humour,” no matter how nonsensical it may be in the context.

However, for Jonson, the “humour” was just the sort of structure on which to build character. And in Volpone he hits upon a similar scheme, reaching back into the middle ages for a “beast fable” and classifying his characters as birds or beasts. So, Volpone is a fox; Mosca, a fly; Voltore, a vulture; Corbaccio, a raven; Corvino, a crow; Sir Politic Would-Be (Pol), a parrot; Peregrine, a falcon, and so forth.

The message Ben Jonson sends is, nevertheless, no respecter of rules or rulers. His characters are human in shape, but beasts in their behavior. The exotic city of Venice is a place of greed, lust, and corruption, where gold is indeed (as Volpone says) “the world’s soul” (I.i.3). Jonson was striking at the new spirit of acquisitiveness abroad in the Renaissance, the failing of the old feudal certainties before the rising middle-class merchants who made money and remade themselves simultaneously. And there is a warning for the city of London in Jonson’s magical, wicked picture of Venice. Jonson warns in Volpone, a city comedy about all cities, that Londoners wishing for Venice’s sophistication may have Venice’s degradation as well if, in
fact, they do not have it already.

Still, there is one last contradiction in Jonson and his most popular play: while he condemns Volpone and the other rogues, while he attacks their vices, he also loves their cleverness and their plots, making from them his own devices and, in his own cleverness, his best, most stage-worthy plot.
Volpone: Food for Thought
By Michael Flachmann
From Souvenir Program, 1991

Ben Jonson’s primary source for the plot of Volpone was undoubtedly taken from the well-known Aesop fable “The Fox Who Feigned Death,” in which a crafty fox covers himself with red mud, lies motionless on the ground, and pretends to be dying. When the birds of prey begin to circle around him, he waits until they are within reach, then seizes and eats them. In like manner, Volpone tricks each of his feathered suitors into thinking he is near death, then feasts upon their avarice and stupidity.

This central image of “feeding upon foolishness” betrays Jonson’s satiric philosophy, in which the abundant fools and sinners of the world exist principally as nourishment for several types of hungry diners: (1) the witty characters of the play, like Volpone and Mosca, who delight in exploiting the greed of their feathered prey; (2) Jonson himself, whose artistic talent depends upon the crafty way he exposes such social aberrations as covetous lawyers and husbands begging to be cuckolded; and, finally, (3) the audience, which happily devours the comic meal displayed on stage before them.

If this theatrical feast of sin and folly simultaneously sustains the plot, exhibits Jonson’s skill as a dramatic satirist, and charms the audience, it also nourishes its viewers in a deeper, more meaningful way. Like the classical Greek and Roman dramatic models the author so proudly emulated, Jonson’s satiric comedy claims to cure its audience members of their own reprehensible behavior by holding up a dramatic mirror in which their worst flaws are reflected in exaggerated form. The rapacious greed and lust of the play have reduced most of the major characters to bestial parodies of their better selves; they have descended one level on the Great Chain of Being, which theorized that mankind was precariously suspended between the angels and the animals. The more foolish their actions, the more beastly they become.

Like Scoto of Mantua’s mystical elixir, Jonson’s comedy offers its audience a cure for a wide range of moral and spiritual imperfections that metaphorically turn lawyers to vultures, greedy men to sly foxes, servants to parasites, and English travelers to silly, chattering parrots. The secret to comic reformation, the author seems to say, is in seeing our flawed behavior for exactly what it is: the degenerate action of beasts. All the playwright must do to cure his audience, therefore, is to expose sin and folly whenever they appear. Thus, Sir Politic Would-Be’s discovery within his tortoise disguise is an emblem for the entire play which promises that each character’s flaws will eventually be revealed and punished in a highly didactic fashion.

As a result of this careful theatrical mixture of pleasant comedy and serious satiric instruction, Volpone affects many theatre-goers like a modern-day, timed-release medication: it slides easily down our throats, yet withholds its medicinal effect until a later, more opportune moment. Typical of such other Jonsonian efforts as Epicoene, The Alchemist, Bartholomew Fair, and Every Man in His Humour, the comic catharsis of Volpone strikes when we least expect it, when the laughter has vanished, when we begin to slip downward on that Great Chain of Being, and the beast within us rears its ugly head. At that moment we are still nourished by Jonson’s comic banquet, which delights and sustains us long after the curtain has fallen.