

The Nature of Human Avarice in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*

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Abstract

Throughout history, avarice has always been an important topic in works of literature. This human desire for more of something and the craving to accumulate more and more wealth; and to hold on to what one has accumulated has always been the focus point of writers since the Greek antiquity and the myth of Midas' lust for gold is a case in point. The goal of this article is to investigate and discuss Ben Jonson's portrayal of this motif in one of his plays; namely, "*Volpone*".

Keywords: Nature of Human Avarice, *Volpone*, portrayal

1. Introduction

Throughout history, avarice has always been an important topic in works of literature. This human desire for more of something and the craving to accumulate more and more wealth; and to hold on to what one has accumulated has always been the focus point of writers since the Greek antiquity and the myth of Midas' lust for gold is a case in point. The goal of this article is to investigate and discuss Ben Jonson's portrayal of this motif in one of his plays; namely, "*Volpone*".

1.1 Characters as Caricatures

The play opens with *Volpone* starting his day with a hymn in praise of gold which he describes as 'the best of things' (I. I. 16). This morbid love of money is the key for *Volpone*'s character which is portrayed by Jonson as a 'type' rather than an 'individual' and that reflects the influence of Renaissance theory based on classical examples (Partridge 122).

Jonson's characters are caricatures because they follow a fixed pattern of behaviour. They do not reveal too much about themselves and their personalities so one is often to deduce and infer about them. So, for example, one has to work out what it is that appeals to *Volpone* about the trickery he has set up. His way with words certainly conveys wit and intelligence and from his language one might deduce delight in his own virtuous acting and pride in the mental agility necessary to maintaining his absurd pretence. Such qualities are necessary to his schemes and seem attractive. Altogether less attractive, however is his lack of moral values and the excesses he is carried to by his lust for Celia. One might say that there is an unattractive foolishness about *Volpone* who fails to see himself being duped by Mosca and who finally has to confess because he has lost control of events (Dessen 76 – 9).

1.2 Characters as Types

Volpone's character type is very complex. This complexity is evidence of the way Jonson uses *Volpone* to sound out all the implications of his theme. One can see this if one thinks about *Volpone*'s household, consisting of Nano, a dwarf, Castrone, a eunuch, and Androgyno, a hermaphrodite. Taken together, they express the perverted abnormality of *Volpone*'s desires, suggestive of the way his love of wealth has bred a new sort of impotent, monstrous family and created a new sort of twisted human nature (Ostovich 10).

At the end of Act I, Scene ii, we see *Volpone* getting ready to dupe his first suitor, Voltore, by putting on a guise of illness:

“Now, my feigned cough, my phthisic, and my gout,
My apoplexy, palsy, and my catarrhs,
Help, with your forced functions, this my posture,

Wherein, this three year, I have milked their hopes.

He comes; I hear him – Uh! uh! uh! O__”

Here we have Volpone the actor, the fraud and the cheat getting himself into the right frame of mind for a performance. But what Jonson also manages to suggest is the way that Volpone's greed and love of wealth is itself an all-consuming sickness which has turned into a way of life. The chief way that this is achieved, of course, is through Volpone's language which is characterized by richness and vitality. Russ McDonald emphasizes that, " Jonson's concentration on unpleasantness helps build up a picture of human beings as subject to disease, illness and decay

(11)".

This is brought out forcefully in Volpone's performance as a quack doctor in Act II, Scene ii :

For, when a humid flux, or catarrh, by
mutability of air falls from your head into
an arm or shoulder, or any other part, take
you a ducat, or your chequeen of gold, and
apply to the place affected : see, what good
effect it can work. No, no, ' tis this blessed
unguento, this rare extraction, that hath
only power to disperse all malignant humours...
To fortify the most indigest and crude
stomach, ay, were it of one that through
Extreme weakness vomited blood, applying only
a warm napkin to the place, after the unction
and fricace;.... (II. ii. 78 – 98).

1.3 Sets of Characters

In *Volpone*, Jonson employs three sets of characters: Corvino, the merchant, Corbaccio, the miser, and Voltore, the lawyer, function as “estates” which provide specific demonstration of Jonson's thesis about gold and society. Celia and Bonario, like Faithful Few, function as virtuous figures whose behaviour provides a standard by which to judge the world of the play. The last set is Volpone and Mosca, who victimize both the “estates” and the virtues (Dessen 81).

Because satire is his object, Ben Jonson therefore has to begin with a character or a group of characters fitted to his lash. He then places them in a certain situation to show them at their worst, and by a prodigious intellectual mastery contrives the complete series of their logical development into successive scenes (McDonald 14).

Jonson's depiction of humans in society disturbs us, for he is pessimistic about the penalties of Adam. His characters are rarely better off at the end than at the beginning of his comedies, and those who accidentally profit do so only financially. The Jonsonian world is static and confined, hardly subject even to change. The characters are flat that they have very little change in mood and motive. They are different from Shakespeare's characters that develop and surprise us (Parteidge 63).

Russ McDonald states that:

Jonson's corrective bent, especially his interest in manners,
prompted him to imagine characters guilty of outlandish moral and
social faults. He seems to regard his characters as means to an end.
There is scarcely a virtuous character in the play (12).

It is obvious that Jonson is not only influenced by classical models, but also by the morality play with its immoral and moralizing vice. He summons up characters who will act out his own fantasies embody his own visions. He thus recreates Volpone's erotic fantasies, and for that matter, Sir politic's idiotic

schemes, with all the creative energy at his disposal. Jonson seeks to win his audience over to an appreciation of the characters' ideals and to sharing the yearnings of libertines and buffoons. He constructs these visions only to destroy them by the intriguers who invent the plots : Volpone and Mosca.

Jonson never thinks of characters as portraits of unique individuals worth studying for their own sake. For him a character in a play is a character in a play – a figure who contributes to a larger design. And one of the main requirements of the classical ' law of persons ' which he follows is that every character should represent some typical human quality, or typical combination of qualities, so that the pattern of interaction between the characters would be typical of human society. (Schelling 20).

Like most satirists, Jonson works through exaggeration, through caricature, but the effect of caricature is to remind us of reality very forcibly. Having decided what qualities he wishes to illustrate, he brings them vividly to life, and can penetrate deeply into human psychology.

2. Italian Nomenclature:

It seems that Jonson has found all the Italian names in John Florio's (1553 – 1625) Italian – English dictionary *A World of Words* (1598). All the names in the play hint at their bearer's character: the Venetian characters bear names of animals which indicate their natures. (Jeffares VII).

Volpone means an old fox; an old, crafty, sly, subtle companion sneaking, lurking, wily deceiver. He has the characteristic red hair eyebrows and beard as Jonson seems to envisage him :

Besides, I never meant him for my heir.
Is not the colour of my beard and eyebrows
To make me known?

3. Vivid Portrayal

Volpone is shown in his mid-forties. His vanity about his personal appearance is clearly revealed:

Thou shalt not find I am now as fresh,
As hot, as high, and in as jovial plight
As when in that so celebrated scene
At recitation of our comedy,
For entertainment of the great Valois,
I acted young Antinous; and attracted
The eyes and ears of all the ladies present,
T'admire each graceful gesture, note, and footing (III, VII, 157–64).

and about his virility :

Frozen, and impotent, and so report me?
That I had Nestor's hernia, thou wouldst think (Ibid. 260-62).

One can see, as the above quotations suggest that Volpone is still very vigorous and potent. Clearly, his disguise as a sick man, with ointment smeared on his face, is not one which flatters him. He associates the invalid role with being ' dead ' (I. IV. 162) and comes to life when he thinks about Celia :

My blood,

My spirits are returned; I am alive: (III. V. 34-35).

Because he lives for pleasure,

What should I do,

But cocker up my genius and live free

To all delights my fortune calls me to ? (I. i. 70-92).

and he resent the discomfort he feels in the court room. But he derives the greatest of all his pleasure from his acting – skill and from laughing at those who are deceived by his disguises. His need to laugh

becomes obsessive in Act V. Thus, he longs for :

Any device, now, of rare, ingenious knavery,
That would possess me with a violent laughter (V. I. 34-35).

Watching the disappointment of his clients gives him 'a rare meal of laughter' (V. ii. 87).

This appetite for laughter or 'sport', causes his mistake of pursuing his victims into the street and leaving Mosca in charge. As Mosca says, he must pay for his sport.

Volpone is vice-like because of his use of disguise and his love of evil for its own sake rather than for any other cause (Dessen 78).

Mosca is no ordinary parasite. He has, like Volpone, a delight in cleverness, and he is extremely inventive and ingeniously quick – witted. He rejects the role of the ordinary parasite and claims that the 'true' parasite is something divine and he praises his skill as a parasite:

Success hath made me wanton. I could skip
Out of my skin, now, like a subtle snake,
I am so limber. O ! Your parasite
Is a most precious thing, dropped from above,
Not bred 'mongst clods and clodpoles here on earth (III. i. 5-9).

Mosca keeps his master delighted by carefully varying the handling of each client. Thus, when Voltrore enters, Mosca announces that he is Volpone's heir, his sole heir, so that the lawyer can hardly believe his luck. When Corbaccio arrives, the strategy shifts : Mosca tells him that Volpone is dying and he lists many morbid symptoms to arouse the old raven's appetite. Corbaccio is told that the heir is still to be named. Corvine, the third visitor is told both that he is the heir and that Volpone's death is imminent. He is even persuaded to join Mosca in verbally abusing the dying magnifico, who pretends deafness with other maladies. Mosca is portrayed as a high – skilled manipulator who treats each suitor according to the extent of his avarice, but every occasion serves primarily to feed Volpone's appetite for more and varied power (Halio 2).

Apart from his quick – wittedness, Mosca has almost no character. He fails with Bonario and Celia because he has no moral sense which could make him capable of understanding how good people will behave in emergency. Among people like himself, he never fails when he is exercising his pure skill in manipulation. But at the end he fails with Volpone because he is no longer practicing his skill for its own sake. He is applying it to the cruder purpose, of getting rich and becoming a gentleman (Jeffares xix-xx).

Alan Dessen Says:

Mosca is the true vice of the play, because the parasite manages
most of the intrigues, reminds the audience continually of his
function, takes occasional slips of tongue, develops a reputation
for truth and honesty, and even moralizes occasionally (79).

The three 'birds of prey' are designed as a group – the smart career-lawyer, the deceit old father, the jealous young husband – quite different types united by greed, so that each one gives up what he values most for the sake of Volpone's money. But within that design their separate characters are sharply realized.

Voltore is treated, throughout the play, ironically as a shrewd man of the world. In his first scene, Mosca begins by praising his 'wise' policy of keeping Volpone's favour by arriving early and bringing gifts:

You still are what you were, sir. Only you,
Of all the rest, are he commands his love,
And you do wisely to preserve it thus,
With early visitation, and kind notes
Of your good meaning to him, which, I know,
Cannot but come most grateful (I. iii. 1-6).

Mosca teases Voltore when he obliges him to listen to his insulting speech about lawyers :

I oft have heard him say how he admired
Men of your large profession that could speak

To every cause, and things mere contraries,
Till they were hoarse again, yet all be law,
That with most quik agility could trun
And return; make knots, and undo them;
Give forked counsel; take provoking gold
On either hand, and put it up. These men,
He knew, would thrive with their humility (I.iii. 252-60).

Voltore is portrayed as a smart calculating careerist, worldly-wise but, ironically, most gullible. Mosca's technique with Voltore is played continually on his image of himself as a worldly-wise lawyer, while showing how gullible his greed makes him. His name implies that he is a greedy cormorant. Legacy hunters are commonly called vultures because they live off the dead (Jeffares xx).

Corbaccio, by contrast, is depicted as deaf and blind that he is hardly aware of what is going on around him, yet he clings tenaciously to his greedy purpose. He is so old that the only thing he could hope to do with Volpone's wealth is to bequeath it to his son, whom he disinherits in order to get it. His age makes him impatient to get results quickly. Unconscious of how he appears to others, he is open in showing his selfish cruelty and grasping miserliness. In this way, Jonson sternly prevents us from feeling sorry for him. Instead we are shown an aged sinner as a horrible and painfully ridiculous sight.

Corvine is so overcome by greed for Volpone's fortune that he is prepared to have his wife go to bed with Volpone, and later calls her a whore and declares himself a cuckold. He is a hypocrite, incapable of shame and wickedly immoral. He is a man who is worse than he knows. His uncertainty how to behave results from a basic lack of knowledge, which he tries to conceal by behaving conventionally as a gentleman. He never loses this false image of himself as a good man. He appears worried that Volpone might find out what he is doing. This fear reveals not his conscience but his fear of being found out. Mosca's role is to make Corvino join Mosca in shouting filthy abuse at Volpone and when he overcomes his scruples about murder (Knights 116).

Sir Politic and Lady Would-Be are portrayed as foolish people, vulgar and pretentious. Sir Politic is ignorant and absurd in his interest in political intrigues and projects, as well as his views on political behaviors. Lady Would-Be, in her own way of pursuing Volpone's money, is ready to offer herself to him and to his servant. She is ridiculous in her talk especially her disjointed references to literature, chemistry and medicine. One recognizes in her a caricature of the supposedly emancipated woman (Renaissance version), who is eager to discourse on dreams, medicine, music, literature, philosophy and the great love-story of her life. Their characters are mainly revealed through floods of foolish chatter. In spite of their social rank and pretensions, they are both shown as basically 'vulgar' characters. For example, Sir Pol professes to admire St Mark's Cathedral so much but because of his being vulgar, he chooses it as spot where he urinates (Ibid., 117).

Peregrine's main function is to expose Sir Politic: if he is a hawk as his name implies, he may be seen as pursuing Sir Politic as a parrot. He supplies ironic comments on Sir Politic's affectation.

Celia and Bonario are depicted as direct, simple unsophisticated types. They are innocent, but they barely triumph over evil and they are decidedly lucky to escape from the situation created by Mosca and the others. It appears that both Celia and Bonario are dull characters. Jonson has meant portraying them as such because he means them to remind his audience of Virtue – figures in Morality drama, who have none of the theatrically – exciting qualities of the Vices. Jonson deliberately insists that his virtuous characters must be judged by moral not theatrical standards which tend to make vice more attractive than virtue. He makes Celia's simple innocence contrast with her husband's complex viciousness and her unchanging constancy contrast with Volpone's role – playing. Bonario's directness is opposed to Mosca's devious scheming; his unselfish behaviour toward Celia is opposed to his father's selfishness. There are also, however, subtler ways in which Jonson uses these characters. In the first place, Celia is a sexually attractive woman, 'a beauty, ripe, as harvest!' (I. V. 109).

Though she says that her beauty is a misfortune, no one in the audience will agree. Her sex-appeal is one of the traps which Jonson sets for our moral judgment. In Bonario's case, the trap is quite different. We are tempted to accept him too easily as an effective champion of virtue. We like him when he leaps to rescue

Celia like a knight in a medieval romance.

The problem with Bonario and Celia is that they do not have enough of the worldly wisdom which their persecutors have too much of (Coles 91 – 8).

4. Conclusion

The transaction among the characters, which helps to attract both readers and audience to the world of the play and the discrepancies between the characters of the play, ranging from the most innocent and virtuous to the malicious, and the way they conduct their interaction, reminds us of the discrepancies in nature and among human beings in real human societies.

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