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BEN JONSON'S BEASTLY COMEDY: "OUTFOXING" THE CRITICS, "GULLING" THE AUDIENCE IN *VOLPONE*

Clifford Davis

If Ben Jonson willfully defies our expectations by celebrating the triumph of chicanery above all else in *Every Man in His Humour*, *The Alchemist*, and *Epicoene*, *Volpone* represents a surprising inversion, or modification, of that Jonsonian plot; despite early, (no doubt) planted, indications in the text that *Volpone* will also adhere to his established pattern, this time the audience is "gulled" not by the unexpected success of the conspirators, but by their unanticipated defeat. Perhaps ethically minded readers might be tempted to conclude that *Volpone* (1606) marks Jonson's return to morality after a series of plays including *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) and *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), in which witty exploitation is not only pardoned, but rewarded.[1] In fact, the play's ending seems a rather obvious attempt by the playwright to "doubly defy" the expectations of the audience just when the structure of his plays was beginning to appear safely programmatic.

In the following pages, I will analyze this curious singularity in *Volpone* as both an attempt by Jonson to unseat the newly established expectations of his audience and as a clever response to his critics. Although the conspirators are punished at the end of the play, the arbitrary circumstances that produce this outcome hardly serve a didactic or heuristic purpose for the audience. Jonson foils his detrac-

[1]The specific referent here is the pardon of Brainworm by Judge Clement at the end of *Every Man in His Humour* (V.i.175–80). The following editions of Jonson's works are cited in this paper: *The Alchemist*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974); *Eastward Ho* in *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, ed. G.A. Wilkes (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1925–1952); *Every Man in His Humour*, ed. Martin Seymour-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992); *Volpone*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1962).

tors once again by a kind of brilliant subterfuge: he gratuitously inserts a moral ending into a universe constructed specifically so that "morality" is meaningless. Modern scholars, many of whom make incisive remarks about *Volpone*, nevertheless fall into the same trap set for Jonson's contemporaries; they are puzzled by the "harshly moralistic" conclusion of the play.[2] In spite of Jonson's rather clever betrayal of expectations, the outcome almost seems predetermined; Volpone's and Mosca's punishment is prefigured not only by a number of ironic statements that turn out to be self-referential, but also by bestial and cannibalistic imagery that serves to equalize every character, including the protagonists, at the lowest possible level. Although Alvin B. Kernan traces a pattern of gradual degradation of men into animals as an Aristotelian parable of descent on the Great Chain of Being, I argue that it is precisely the *lack* of transformation in *Volpone* that defuses the morality of its conclusion. This question is illuminated by Jonson's classical sources, such as Homer and Ovid, which thematize the relationship between metamorphosis and dramatic performance, but do not directly equate polymorphism with moral decline. I also provide evidence for the first time that Jonson draws upon Apuleius both for the thematic construct of transformation and as a clever device to attack the judicial system and the priesthood.

In order to illuminate Jonson's elusive strategy in *Volpone*, it is necessary to provide a brief, biographical context for this response to his critics. Why should he be so preoccupied with the evaluation of his audience that he feels compelled "to put the snaffle in their mouths that cry out: We never punish vice in our interludes, &c"?

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[2]Robert Watson, *Ben Jonson's Parodic Strategy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), 83. However, most modern scholars recognize Jonson's project as an attempt to defy the expectations of his audience, although they interpret his strategy in different ways. For example, Watson views Jonson's method in *Volpone* and the other comedies as a scrambling of generic plots that surprises not only the audience, but also the characters themselves. Therefore, as Watson asserts, the conclusion represents a deft switch of genre from the beast fable to a moral tale. See Watson, 80–97. (I am indebted to Professor Watson for his careful reading of this manuscript and helpful editorial comments.) Anne Barton, on the other hand, while recognizing that *Volpone* is not a morality play, contends that the ending serves as just, if harsh, punishment for the dissolution of the characters. She points out, however, that the final decision rests not with the Avocatori but with the spectators of the comedy. See her *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), 105–99. Critics who actually have viewed *Volpone* as a "moral comedy" include Robert Knoll, *Ben Jonson's Plays* (Lincoln: Nebraska Univ. Press, 1964), 65–7; and Charlotte Spivack, *George Chapman* (New York: Twayne, 1967), 99.

(*Volpone*, "Epistle" 109–10). Although this criticism of Jonson's work may have troubled him to a certain extent, it seems likely that he was less concerned with the reaction to the "immoral" endings of his earlier plays than frightened by his recent imprisonment. In 1605, one year before *Volpone* was performed, Jonson was collaborating on *Eastward Ho* with George Chapman and John Marston.[3] This play tells the story of Gertrude, Sir Petronel Flash, Touchstone, Security, and other typical Jonsonian fools, whose expectations are confounded by, among other things, a misguided belief in the determinacy of their names. I shall omit a detailed synopsis of the plot for the sake of brevity and because it is not one of Jonson's best plays; perhaps the collaborative experience attenuated and limited Jonson's satire.[4] The salient point, and the one which got Jonson into trouble, is that the authors included a relatively minor character called First Gentleman, who refers to Sir Petronel derisively as "one of my thirty pound knights" (*Eastward Ho* IV.i.178): a pointed and unflattering reference to the Scottish King James I's infamous custom of selling knighthoods for this sum. As if this were not enough, the First Gentleman begins to speak in a ridiculous and exaggerated brogue. Furthermore, another minor character, Captain Seagull, makes two explicitly critical remarks about the Scots earlier in the play, including a derisive comment about James's hope of uniting the two kingdoms (III.iii.45–8).

The reception of these audacious references is not surprising; shortly after the play was performed, Jonson and Chapman were thrown into prison and threatened with facial mutilation.[5] Although the playwright was soon pardoned with the assistance of his patron, Lord D'Aubigny, Jonson seems to have been both bewildered and angered by his punishment.[6] His harrowing experience in 1605 can hardly have failed to influence the writing of *Volpone*, less than one year later. In fact, although the play must be called a comedy because it is inherently satirical, resembling Jonson's other comedies both in form and characterization, some critics have viewed it as a "comic

[3]David Riggs, *Ben Jonson, A Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), 122.

[4]As Watson suggests (82).

[5]Riggs tells us that John Marston fled just in time to avoid this punishment (124). For a more detailed account of Jonson's imprisonment, see G.P.V. Akrigg, *Jacobean Pageant* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), 48–55.

[6]Jonson "describes himself as being persecuted, polluted, and buried alive; he finds it particularly galling to be imprisoned over something so base as—'the word irkes mee'—'a Play'" (Riggs, 124).

tragedy." For example, Edward Partridge has remarked that "the tone seems closer to tragedy than comedy." Northrop Frye has even called *Volpone* "a kind of comic imitation of a tragedy."[7] Indeed, Jonson's deliberate confusion of genres is crucial to my reading of the play. If *Volpone* is different from his other comedies because it straddles the boundary between comedy and tragedy, its dark tone emphasizes the playwright's desire to defy the expectations of his audience. *Volpone* shows the marks of Jonson's imprisonment both in his calculated sabotage of critical expectations and in his depiction of an immoral world inhabited by beasts. It would be simplistic, however, to interpret the play as merely a petulant manipulation of his detractors. Jonson's incarceration seems to have convinced him that local satire was too risky; as a preemptive response to further censure, the playwright retreated into the allegorical non-specificity of fables and classical allusions.

Jonson's intention to deviate from his standard plot is established early in the play through a number of ironic statements by the conspirators. Their inability to recognize the self-referential mordancy of these remarks indicates that, unlike with Brainworm in *Every Man in His Humour* or with Face in *The Alchemist*, the directorial control of the "gulling pageant" produced by Mosca and Volpone is ephemeral and unstable. The protagonists' illusion of control is always among the primary targets of the irony; each of these remarks is made in a context of self-congratulation that escalates until their plot begins to unravel. Jonson plants the seeds of Mosca's and Volpone's final disaster early in the play. In Act I, Mosca convinces Corbaccio to "inscribe" Volpone as his heir and disinherit his son (iv.93–133). When the old gull departs, Volpone leaps up from his "deathbed," while he and his servant engage in another round of self-congratulation on their fine "performances." Volpone then exclaims gleefully, "What a rare punishment is avarice to itself!" (142–3) in reference to Corbaccio's foolish act, without realizing that he has simultaneously implicated his own greed (and Mosca's), and prophesied their destruction. If, through a close reading of this line, an audience familiar with Jonson's other comedies is tempted to identify Volpone as the final gull in *Mosca*'s plot (in the same way that Subtle

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[7]Edward Partridge, *The Broken Compass* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958), 165; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), 70.

is eventually hoodwinked by the servant, Face),[8] the text also provides evidence for the crafty servant's imminent downfall.

In Act II, precisely at the moment when Volpone is praising his own acting ability ("I did it well" [II.iv.32]), Mosca remarks, "So well, would I could follow you in mine, / With half the happiness; and, yet, I would / Escape your epilogue" (33–4). This clever prediction is only half-right, however; unlike Face's final hoodwinking of his colleagues in *The Alchemist*, the servant's "epilogue" is inextricably bound to his collaborator not only because Volpone is his master, but also because Mosca refuses to compromise by sharing their profits (V.vii.69). While Mosca plays the part of a faithful, if officious, servant, he retains his private illusion of control as the director of a plot that has no room for collaboration. Ironically, however, his refusal to cooperate with his master finally ruins both of their "performances."

Although I analyze Jonson's appropriation of classical sources in more detail later in this essay, Volpone's evocative allusion to the *Odyssey* must also be included in the list of self-referential ironies. In Act III, again as a means of self-flattery, Volpone compares his own powers of histrionic transformation to the mythological creature Proteus: "In varying figures I would have contended / With the blue Proteus, or the horned flood" (vii.153–4). The unintentional irony in this statement lies in our recognition that the most famous description of Proteus in Homer involves not his ability to deceive and escape through polymorphism, but his *capture* by Menelaus (*Odyssey* IV.431–77). Despite the monster's notorious, supernatural power, the hero defeats Proteus by clinging tightly to him as Proteus transforms himself repeatedly into horrifying and dangerous animals.[9] Therefore,

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[8]See *The Alchemist* (V.iv.123–50). The first audiences of *Volpone* would not have made this comparison; *The Alchemist* was not written until 1610.

[9]Homer says that

> ἀλλ᾽ ἦ τοι πρώτιστα λέων γένετ᾽ ἠυγένειος,
> αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα δράκων καὶ πάρδαλις ἠδὲ μέγας σῦς.
> γίγνετο δ᾽ ὑγρὸν ὕδωρ καὶ δένδρεον ὑψιπέτηλον
> ἡμεῖς δ᾽ ἀστεμφέως ἔχομεν τετληότι θυμῷ.
>
> (First he transformed himself into a well-maned lion,
> and then into a snake, then a leopard, then a great boar,
> then into running water, into a tree with high foliage,
> but we held on to him tightly with sedulous spirit.) (*Odyssey* IV.456–9)

All translations of the ancient texts are mine, unless otherwise indicated. I have used the Loeb Classical Library edition of the Greek and Latin works cited in this paper:

Jonson silently condemns his protagonist by trapping him in an unwitting and ominous intertextual comparison. Furthermore, not only does this literary allusion parallel the wide array of bestial characters in *Volpone*, it is extraordinarily well-suited (as Volpone intends) as a metaphor for the continual dramatic impersonations of the two conspirators. Indeed, the self-referential resonances of proteanism may extend beyond the characters to the author himself. Perhaps Jonson engages in a kind of dramatic polymorphism to evade further censure; although *Volpone* includes a "just" conclusion, it is far too versatile to be tacked down as a morality play. In any event, Jonson was a consummate and ostentatious classicist, so it is unlikely that this reference is accidental.[10]

The bestial and cannibalistic imagery in the play may also be interpreted as an indication that none of the characters, not even the clever conspirators, will triumph in the play. As we have seen in the responses of Partridge and Frye, the playwright's association of human beings with scavenging animals imbues the play with an atmosphere of brutality that undermines its comic effect. In a world inhabited by the fox (Volpone), the fly (Mosca), the vulture (Voltore), ravens (Corbaccio and Corvino), and Peregrine (the hawk), it seems almost certain that *all* life will be "nasty, brutish and short." Before we examine the specific images of savagery in the play, however, it is useful to elucidate Jonson's modification of the Aesopian fable that provides the basic outlines for the plot of *Volpone*.

Jonson clearly based his comedy on the Aesopian beast fable, "The Fox and the Grapes" and its variants, which were immensely popular during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.[11] Although it would be gratuitous to enumerate the many differences between *Volpone* and Aesop, the most dramatic deviation of Jonson's comedy

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Homer: The Odyssey, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. A.T. Murray, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960); *Ovid: Metamorphoses*, trans. F. J. Miller, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1926); *Apuleius: The Golden Ass (Metamorphoses)*, ed. and trans. J. Arthur Hanson (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989).

[10]Anne Barton has identified an astounding list of classical sources for *Volpone* alone. She includes Pythagoras, Plato, Aristophanes, Menander, Ovid, and Plautus. Her analysis of Jonson's particular debt to Aristophanes is original and insightful. See her excellent chapter on *Sejanus* and *Volpone* in *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, 92–119. Alvin Kernan's enumeration of classical sources for the play is even more extensive in his introduction to the Yale *Volpone*, 5.

[11]For example, the story of Chauntecleer and Pertelote in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* is an imaginative retelling of this Aesopian fable.

from the fable is also highly significant in regard to our analysis: the ending. In Aesop's tale, a fox pretends to be dying in order to attract a number of predatory birds, all of whom fall for this clever ruse. Naturally, the fox's superior wit triumphs in the end, winning him an abundant and relatively cheap meal. The moral of the fable is simple, but pointed: predatory avarice is likely to be exploited and overwhelmed by an insuperable wit. Although this moral seems rather well-suited to a number of Jonson's comedies that involve the triumph of chicanery (such as *Every Man in His Humour*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*), it does *not* apply, finally, to *Volpone*: the play which bears the most conspicuous similarities to Aesop's fable. In a rather surprising reversal of audience expectations at the end, Volpone is betrayed not only by his collaborator, but also by his own ignorance.

While it does not pertain directly to the thesis of predetermination in the play, Robert Watson's assertion that Jonson repeatedly deprives his characters of the generic plots from which they derive provides a compelling solution for *Volpone*'s unanticipated ending. He argues that Jonson deliberately flouts expectations both by casting his characters in roles for which they are ill-suited and by reversing genre in the middle of his plays. In this case, as Watson argues, the playwright waits until the very end of the tale and then surprises his own characters with an exchange of plots:

> Volpone [gloats] over...the fulfillment of a standard little literary piece in which his is the triumphant role. He does not—cannot—recognize that Jonson may decline to sustain the parallel all the way to the end. The moldy tale in which Volpone has cast himself with too much confidence, vanity, and literary-mindedness, becomes instead a different story, "called mortifying of a fox" (5.12.125), as Volpone himself ruefully acknowledges.[12]

Although this interpretation would be less convincing if it were applied indiscriminately to Jonson's corpus, there is no question that it works quite well here, and in a number of the comedies.[13] Nevertheless, the audience and the characters could be accused of hermeneutic

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[12]Watson, 85.

[13]Including, e.g., *Every Man in His Humour*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*. This reading is less satisfactory for *Eastward Ho*, as Watson acknowledges, perhaps because of the collaboration of Marston and Chapman (82). In addition, Jonson's more sentimental, later plays, such as *The New Inn* (1629), demonstrate less insouciant innovation both in genre and plot.

unwakefulness. For if the playwright surprises us with Volpone's demise, the pervasive, savage imagery in the play provides subtle, but clear indications that the outcome will be very different from its antecedents.

We have seen that the bestial correspondences of the protagonists and their victims parallel "The Fox and the Grapes." As Volpone prepares to hoodwink his victims, he directly invokes the beast fable:

> Now, now my clients
> Begin their visitation! Vulture, kite
> Raven, and Gorcrow, all my birds of prey,
> That think me turning carcass, now they come. (I.ii.87–90)

and, as Mosca informs him that Voltore has brought an antique, gold plate to ingratiate himself into his "dying" master's will, Volpone exclaims,

> Good! and not a fox
> Stretched on the earth, with fine delusive sleights
> Mocking a gaping crow? ha, Mosca! (I.ii.94–6)

Clearly, by means of these highly conspicuous and ubiquitous allusions to Aesop, Jonson establishes the connection between *Volpone* and "The Fox and the Grapes" precisely so that he can betray expectations at the end. The animal imagery in the play extends far beyond Aesop's fable, however. In the same scene, Volpone describes his project as "[hooding] an ass with reverend purple" and his clients as "harpies" (111, 123). The first must be a reference to Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, a work that has often escaped notice as one of the playwright's sources; the second alludes, perhaps, to Virgil's the *Aeneid*.[14] In any event, the inclusion of additional bestial images, particularly of rapacious, supernatural creatures like the harpy, adds complexity to the tableau. The crowding of these images soon pervades *Volpone* with an atmosphere of savagery.

While references to Aesop are repeatedly invoked in the play,[15] Jonson includes a wide variety of additional bestial representations. For example, Mosca imagines their clients as fish "gaping for legacies" (I.iv.135), whose avarice is "a bait [that] covers any hook" (I.v.28). As the mountebank, "Scoto of Mantua," Volpone dismisses his competitors as "apes...in imitation" (II.ii.147–8). Corvino, suspecting that

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[14]*Aeneid* III.225 ff., where the harpy Celaeno steals the banquet of the Trojans.

[15]A comprehensive list of these allusions is unnecessary, but other examples include: I.iv.81, 124; V.v.7–8, 18.

Celia will make him a cuckold with the mountebank, refers to Volpone's "goatish eyes" (II.v.34). Describing the charlatanic remedies of doctors who will "cure" Volpone, Mosca describes "a flayed ape," "a dog," and "an oil / With wild cats' skins" (II.vi.30–2). Using an image that is at once bestial and sexual, Mosca celebrates his own acting ability as "like a subtle snake, / I am so limber" (III.i.6–7). This is merely a small sample, and, in addition to the specific, almost omnipresent invocations of Aesop's fable, the effect is overwhelming. Yet, this is still not enough for Jonson; the atmosphere of brutality in *Volpone* is also enhanced and punctuated by his frequent references to cannibalism.

Rapacious cruelty is not limited to animals in the dark universe of the play. That brutality extends to the human realm also emphasizes the predetermination of Jonson's conclusion. Like the bestial representations in *Volpone*, however, images of the cannibal do not always correspond specifically to the predatory motif from Aesop's fable; that is, this imagery is not intended solely to transfer "The Fox and the Grapes" into human relations. Jonson's introduction of cannibalism is not merely mimetic; it is an innovation that should be seen as independent of Aesop's influence. These representations seem to suggest a willful inclusion of exquisite, human savagery by the playwright. Furthermore, cannibalism serves as more than a metaphor for the gulling project of Volpone and Mosca; it is used in reference to a diverse group of characters. Images of the cannibal are scattered throughout the text. These include Volpone's reference to "grind[ing] men into powder" (I.i.39); his prediction that his clients will "swallow / A melting heir as glibly as your Dutch / Will pills of butter" (I.i.42–3); Androgyno's description of lawyers who "devour flesh, and sometimes one another" (I.ii.44); Mosca's assertion that Voltore "smell[s] a carcass" (I.iv.61); and, most explicitly, Volpone's celebration of riches as "better than rob[bing] churches... / Or fat, by *eating once a month a man*" (my italics; I.v.91–2). These references to cannibalism are the most conspicuous, but there are others.[16]

If, as we have seen, the universe of *Volpone* is bestial, cannibalistic, and hopelessly corrupt, the final disaster seems inevitable. Like Ovid's Iron Age, when Lycaon attempted to serve Zeus a repast of boiled human flesh (*Metamorphoses* I.200–31), and when

[16]Volpone's description of his clients' desire to "engross" him also seems to suggest cannibalism (I.i.82). Mosca's assertion that doctors "flay a man before they kill him" could be interpreted as preparation for human consumption, but this reading would be forced.

> ..ferroque nocentius aurum prodierat...
> vivitur ex rapto...
> imminet exitio vir coniugis...
> filius ante diem patrios inquirit
> in annos...
> ...et Virgo caede madentes
> ultima caelestum terras Astraea reliquit.
>
> (...gold had appeared more harmful than iron...
> men lived by plunder...
> the husband looks to the murder of his wife...
> the son eager to satisfy his greed watches the stars
> to time his fathers' death...
> and the astral virgin, last in the sky,
> has left the earth moist with slaughter,)[17]

the brutal atmosphere of *Volpone* suggests that the conspirators' final destruction is predestined from the very beginning. Although it would be speculative, one could argue that Volpone's ignorant reference to the Golden Age cited later in this essay actually indicates Jonson's tacit association of the conspirators and their clients with an Ovidian *Iron Age*.[18] The familial treachery of Corbaccio, who writes his son out of his will (I.iv.9–118), and Corvino's attempt to sell his wife (III.vii) also support this comparison. Perhaps Jonson, as the creator of this world, replicates Zeus' gesture of disgust by destroying the protagonists' fortunes. This is not to say, however, that the conclusion is "harshly moralistic"; the imposition of justice must be a kind of external *deus ex machina* precisely because Jonson has created a world where "morality" does not exist. Before addressing his appropriation and modification of classical sources, however, we must evaluate the function of Celia and Bonario, the two characters who cannot be included in the ranks of avaricious beasts and whose virtue seems to be rewarded at the end of the play. Their roles could be viewed as an indication that, contrary to all of the other textual evidence, Jonson introduces a moral element in *Volpone*.

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[17]These lines are from *Metamorphoses* I.141–2, 144, 146, 147, 149–50. It is interesting to note here that gold metal "had appeared" (*prodierat*) not during the Golden Age, as we might expect, but as a nefarious motivation for violence during the age of Iron. This subtle distinction indicates that Ovid used the adjective "golden" (*aurea*) merely as a metaphorical appellation.

[18]The popularization of Ovid's ages as a literary motif in Jonson's day is attested by Thomas Heywood's plays: *The Golden Age* (1611), *The Brazen Age* (1613), *The Silver Age* (1613), and *The Iron Age* (1632).

The presence of Celia and Bonario may seem to provide evidence for those who view the play as a moral comedy. Certainly they cannot be associated with either the conspirators or their beastly clients; even their names seem suggestive of "heavenly virtue." Furthermore, the young couple are involved neither in the chicanery of Volpone and Mosca, nor in the self-aggrandizing blandishments of the gulls, including Celia's husband, Corvino, and Bonario's father, Corbaccio. Celia and Bonario belong to the second tier of fools in the conspirators' game; they are the victims of the swindled. Essentially, they serve as little more than a testament to the elaborate consequences of the conspirators' ruse. It even could be argued that they are almost irrelevant to the plot because their parts are so marginal. Jonson seems to punctuate their irrelevance by defusing the heroism of their "virtuous" scenes.

For example, the stilted, self-conscious tones of Bonario's leaping rescue in Act III seem deliberately contrived by Jonson. The absurdity of this "Dudley Do-Right" speech cannot be accidental; when he bursts from the closet to save the young girl, he proclaims to Volpone,

> Forbear, foul ravisher! libinous swine!
> Free the forced lady, or thou diest, imposter.
> But that I am loth to snatch thy punishment
> Out of the hand of justice, thou shouldst yet
> Be made the timely sacrifice of vengeance,
> Before this altar, and this dross, thy idol. (III.vii.267–72)

This alliterative, assonantal speech is a silly piece of heroic nonsense. It seems curiously out of place in the play. Similarly, Celia's scenes are incongruous with the mordant satire of a Jonsonian comedy. For example, she seems to be playing the part of a virtuous Lucrece in her bathetic entreaty of Volpone. In an attempt to resist his seduction, she pleads,

> If you have ears that will be pierced, or eyes
> That can be opened, a heart may be touched,
> Or any part that yet sounds man about you;
> If you have touch of holy saints, or heaven,
> Do me the grace to let me 'scape. If not
> Be bountiful and kill me. (III.vii.240–5)

These lines might be poignant if they did not confer so strangely with the rest of the play; in Volpone's world, this speech merely seems ridiculous. Celia and Bonario may seem incongruous because,

as John G. Sweeney argues, they belong in a romance melodrama, not a satirical comedy.[19] This assertion is compelling, but difficult to evaluate. As with Watson's imaginative, similar arguments, we must be circumspect about reading too deeply into Jonson's intentions. In any event, Celia and Bonario's secondary victimization is instructive if we consider Jonson's level of compassion for the gulls in his other comedies. For instance, despite the colorful personality of the bombastic Sir Epicure and his essential role in the humor of *The Alchemist*, he receives little sympathy from Subtle, Face, (or Jonson). Mammon has been defrauded of his money and pride so outrageously by the end of the play that he is determined to "mount a turnip cart and preach / The end o' the world (*Alchemist* V.v.81–2). One assumes that the virtuous couple would elicit even less interest from a playwright who so clearly delights in roguish characters. It hardly seems likely that the playwright has inserted them as "heroes" in the play. Perhaps Jonson intimates that Celia and Bonario are the greatest fools of all in *Volpone*—liminal figures in a world where their virtues are not only impotent, but irrelevant. Their incongruity with the rest of the cast seems to reinforce the implicit message that stable definitions of justice have no place in the world of *Volpone*.

Our analysis of the thematic and structural significance of bestial imagery in *Volpone* bears upon the central question of Jonson's deviation from the standard plot established in earlier plays like *Every Man in His Humour*. As I have indicated, the atmosphere of brutality in the play created by bestial imagery, animal correspondences, and references to cannibalism not only prefigures, but even *requires* a different kind of resolution from the very beginning of *Volpone*. In contrast, Alvin B. Kernan argues that *Volpone* demonstrates the moral degeneration of characters who gradually become slaves to their physical appetites.[20] He contends that Jonson, in order to deflate the Renaissance promise of human ascendancy on the Great Chain of Being, depicts a movement "down the ladder" by characters "transformed by their cunning and greed into the beasts to whose sensuality they 'principally decline'" (19).[21] Therefore, according to

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[19]John G. Sweeney III, *Jonson and the Psychology of Public Theater* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), 75.

[20]Kernan, introduction to the Yale *Volpone*, 16–26.

[21]The Great Chain of Being is essentially an extension of Plato's belief in the corrupting influence of the appetites conflated with Aristotle's hierarchical gradation of the five senses; both philosophers agreed that corporeality results in a dimunition of intellectual potential, threatening to transform human beings into "lower" animals.

Kernan, the animal imagery in *Volpone* "serves to remind us that we are watching a spectacle of men turning into beasts" because of their rapacious physicality. The central theme of metamorphosis in the play is indisputable. Although Kernan includes a diverse list of possible classical sources for Jonson's comedy including Petronius, Seneca, and Juvenal (5), he neglects to mention the two works that seem to corroborate his assertion of gradual, degenerative transformation in the play: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. Jonson's use of *The Golden Ass* as a source for the play is less conspicuous than his debt to Ovid, but both Latin works are the most prominent literary progenitors of the thematic construct of transformation underlying *Volpone*. An analysis of their influences upon the play assists us in our evaluation of Kernan's thesis.

As I suggested in my discussion of cannibalism in the play, Volpone's initial celebration of gold contains an evocative reference to Ovid's Golden Age: "Well did wise poets by thy glorious name / Title that age which they would have the best" (I.i.14–5). In another example of ignorant misreading of his own lines, however, Volpone seems to miss the double, symbolic association of this title: 1) Ovid's appellation of this inaugural, edenic age has nothing at all to do with precious metal—"golden" serves as a metaphor for virtue,[22] a quality sorely *lacking* in the protagonist; and 2) the Golden Age was intended as a contrast to present depravity (the Iron Age), for which Volpone, as we have seen, serves as an excellent representative. Therefore, Jonson's early allusion to Ovid might be viewed inferen-

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[22]Ovid's mention of the precious metal is clearly metaphorical. He says:

> aurea prima sata est aetas, quae vindice nullo
> sponte sua, sine lege fidem rectumque colebat.
> poena metusque aberant, nec verba minantia fixo
> aere ligabantur, nec supplex turba timebat
> iudicis ora sui, sed reant sine vindice tuti.
>
> (The golden age was first; when Man yet new,
> No rule but uncorrupted reason knew:
> And, with a native bent, did good pursue.
> Unforc'd by punishment, un-aw'd by fear,
> His words were simple, and his soul sincere;
> Needless was written law, where none opprest:
> The law of man was written in his breast.)

This is the beautiful Dryden translation from Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, William Congreve, et al. (New York: Heritage Press, 1961), 6.

tially as an indication of a gradual, transformative deterioration in *Volpone*. On the other hand, Volpone's other direct reference to Ovid simply highlights the theme of metamorphosis in regard to *acting*, the primary occupation of the conspirators in the play. He attempts to entice Celia by citing Ovidian seduction myths: "Whilst we, in changed shapes, act Ovid's tales, / Thou like Europa now, and I like Jove, / Then I like Mars, and thou like Erycine... (III.vii.221–3). Volpone seems to regard acting as a means of personal, if ephemeral, elevation, rather than degradation; he promises Celia a kind of mythical apotheosis through performance. In any case, this quote clearly indicates that the metamorphoses in *Volpone* are directly related to dramatic impersonation, not moral decline. Even Kernan recognizes that "the idea of playing is the central theme of *Volpone*."[23]

Jonson's subtle allusions to the second-century mock epic of Apuleius seem to intimate a progressive deterioration in the play. *The Golden Ass* is the story of Lucius, a man whose hubris and experiments with magic transform him into an ass. His metamorphosis and subsequent attempts to retrieve his human form parody Greek and Latin epics, Homer's the *Odyssey* and particularly, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Indeed, Apuleius' method of appropriating and subverting earlier models represents a classical antecedent for Jonson's strategy. Although they are often mentioned in regard to the Pythagorean theory of metempsychosis, Jonson's frequent references to the "moyle" and "ass" in Act I suggest the influence of Apuleius. For example, Nano's description of "transmigration" (I.ii.11) into animals includes the "ox and ass, camel, mule, goat, and brock" (I.ii.23); Androgyno's account of his own metamorphoses after his experience with lawyers includes the form of a "good, dull moyle" and then "a very strange beast, by some writers called an ass" (I.ii.38, 42); when Mosca contends that riches give the appearance of sophistication, he sarcastically remarks "...hood an ass with reverend purple, / So you can hide his two ambitious ears, / And he shall pass for a cathedral doctor" (I.ii.111–3).

Not only do these numerous descriptions of transformation into mules and asses echo the tale of Lucius, but it seems likely that Apuleius is intended as one of the writers who calls the "strange beast" an ass. In his description of the metamorphosis, Lucius says that:

> Iam facies enormis et os
> prolixum et nares hiantes et labiae pendulae; sic et

[23]Kernan, 11.

> aures immodicis horripilant auctibus. Nec ullum
> miserae reformationis video solacium, nisi quod
> mihi iam nequenti tenere Photidem natura cres-
> cebat. Ac dum salutis inopia cuncta corporis mei
> considerans non avem me sed *asinum* video...
>
> (Now my face was huge and
> my mouth extended with gaping nostrils and hanging lips;
> my ears also became bristly in their excessive growth.
> Nor did I perceive any consolation in my wretched
> transformation, except that though I could not now hold
> Photis in my arms, my natural faculty was also getting larger.
> Helplessly examining all the aspects of my body
> I saw that I was not a bird, but an *ass*. [III. 25; my emphasis])

Moreover, Jonson's derisive characterization of lawyers and priests attacks some of the same targets as Apuleius' satire. Lucius' condemnation of lawyers as "vultures in togas" ("togati vulturii," X.33) and his wholesale repudiation of the Roman courts may have inspired both the characterization of the corrupt Voltore and the unflattering depiction of the Avocatori in *Volpone*. After his own run-in with the law, Jonson would have found cynical representations of the court extremely sympathetic to his own situation and exquisitely appropriate as source material for his play. Mosca's reference to a "cathedral doctor" is reminiscent of the bumbling priest, *Asinius* Marcellus, in Apuleius (XI.27; my ital.) and Lucius' peroration to the court: "But someone may reproach me for this attack of indignation, thinking to himself 'So now we must endure the philosophical musings of an ass?'" ("Sed ne quis indignationis meae reprehendat impetum secum sic reputans 'Ecce nunc patiemur philosophantem nobis asinum?'" X.33). It seems quite likely that Jonson would have had access to this work. The influence of Apuleius in the Renaissance was widespread: according to David Lindsay, *The Golden Ass* provided inspiration for Boccaccio, Petronius, and Cervantes.[24] In any event, the influence of Apuleius would not provide compelling evidence for degeneration in *Volpone*. Although *The Golden Ass* is a story about bestial transformation, Lucius' experience ultimately is not degrading because it edifies and rejuvenates him (XI.15–6). Androgyno also describes his final metamorphosis into a fool as the one that he "can call bless'ed"

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[24]Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*. trans. David Lindsay (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1960), introduction, 27–9. Neither Barton nor Kernan mentions Apuleius in their very inclusive lists of Jonson's classical sources.

(I.ii.57). More importantly, like Jonson's Ovidian allusions, references to the ass reinforce the theme of ephemeral transformation through acting in *Volpone.*

The degeneration that Kernan envisions in *Volpone* has *already* taken place by the time it begins. Although there may be a great deal of acting by the participants, their "play-world" is neither moral nor immoral. There is little *actual* transformation in the play; all the characters are animals from beginning to end. Any attempt to assign responsibility to Mosca for the moral corruption of Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore must locate a moment of transformation for these characters. It doesn't exist; not only are they dissolute from the very beginning, each chooses his own evil act independently of the servant's influence. When Mosca suggests that Volpone's illness can be remedied only by the attainment of a sexual partner (II.vi.34–5), Corvino offers his own wife without reservation (II.vi.80–1, 89–95). Although Mosca advises Corbaccio to disinherit his son so that he can "inscribe [Volpone as]...heir" (I.iv.94–5), the old man is so pleased with the idea that he claims it as his own; he even suggests that he had already considered this plan (109–19). The horrific implications of these decisions in the first act suggest that both the conspirators and their clients are degenerate throughout the play. Therefore, the absence of morality casts doubt upon Kernan's reading of *Volpone* as an Aristotelian allegory of progressive, appetitive corruption. Establishing the degree of change in the characters is not merely quibbling because it elucidates the dark universe Jonson imagined after his incarceration.

Although the conspirators are punished at the end of *Volpone*, Jonson deprives his audience and his critics of a didactic moral by the oblique presentation of the conclusion. The conviction of Volpone and Mosca hardly represents even a belated introduction of morality into the play. Neither would have been punished if Mosca had been willing to strike a deal with his master; his baffling response to Volpone's generous, desperate offer of half the profits is "I cannot now / Afford it you so cheap" (V.xii.68). As if to emphasize that the imposition of justice at the end is merely accidental, the Avocatori are completely unconvinced by the veracious testimony of Celia and Bonario, the "virtuous characters" (IV.v.141–57), before the servant's refusal. We can only conclude that if Mosca and Volpone had reached an agreement, the author would have rewarded chicanery once again. If Jonson has learned anything from his imprisonment, it is that legal and critical judgments can be arbitrary. In *Volpone*, Jonson is unwill-

ing, finally, to strike a deal. The metamorphoses in *Volpone* may seem to anticipate a transcendent morality, but remain circumscribed in the realm of dramatic performance as elusive (and empty) metonyms for playacting; the protean impersonations of the protagonist and his servant make them neither more nor less honorable. The playwright repeatedly tantalizes the characters and the audience with the possibility of metamorphosis, but reserves the privilege for himself. Thus, *Volpone* reflects Jonson's view of the world and becomes an elaborate gulling project designed to outwit his persecutors and critics. The bestial universe inhabited by Mosca and Volpone is one in which virtue has already ceased to exist at the *outset of the play*. As Corvino tells us: "Honor!...There's no such thing in nature; a mere term / Invented to awe fools" (38).

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