Introducing Volpone by Ben Jonson

The Playwright

Ben Jonson is the third most important name in English drama after William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. Although he did not achieve much success with his tragedies, Ben Jonson became very well-known for his comedies. Drawing a comparison between Shakespeare and Jonson, John Dryden gave an interesting note in his Essay of Dramatic Poesy: “Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare.” David Daiches summarizes to say, “No English writer was more highly idiosyncratic than Jonson, and his picturesque and violent life. Jonson’s sardonic view of human nature owed nothing to classical sources.”

The master of the urban satirical comedy of manners, Ben Jonson brought raw and unflattering contemporary life within dramatic range. He harnessed disparate, rowdy Elizabethan life to the classically derived rules of dramatic construction that would shape neoclassical theatrical ideals for the next two centuries.

Born in 1572 or 1573, almost a decade after Shakespeare, Jonson was part of the next generation of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists who had Shakespeare’s works and the drama that he pioneered to imitate, modify, and transform. Both Shakespeare and Jonson came from similar lower-middle-class backgrounds, but Shakespeare was a countryman, who drew extensively on his love and familiarity with rural life, while Jonson was a Londoner, whose arena and references were predominantly urban.

Major Theme of Volpone

“Volpone”, which is part of his mature comedies, or second period, is his most significant and most-performed play. Ben Jonson parodies the material “age of gold” referring to the Golden age from Greek mythology. Being a fable, human vices are the main reason for people’s moral degradation and the perversion of the Golden Age. He accentuates on people’s tendency to deceive others out of greed, vanity, sloth, and lust. Hedonism had been an important factor of the Jacobins. It is the belief that pleasure is the most important thing in life. The
term, hedonism was derived from the ancient Greek for pleasure. The philosophers of the time applied it as a true source of one’s real joy and relief of life.

Volpone, or The Old Fox clearly shows Jonson’s response. Instead of the conventional romantic intrigue that Shakespeare had relied on in his comedies, Jonson submits to comic ridicule the “ragged follies of the time.” Blending the fortune-hunting plot and character types of Roman comedies with native allegorical elements of the morality play and the beast fable, Jonson ingeniously arranges variations on the theme of human greed. At the center of the play is Volpone, the fox, a Renaissance Venetian schemer, and Mosca (the fly), his servant, who extort riches from those courting Volpone’s favour as Volpone pretends to be a dying man in need of an heir. As the play opens Volpone delivers an invocation to gold that sets the play’s theme of avarice (greed/solicitation):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!} \\
\text{Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.} \\
\text{Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is} \\
\text{The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun} \\
\text{. . . O thou son of Sol,}\,* \\
\text{But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,} \\
\text{With adoration, thee, and every relic} \\
\text{Of sacred treasure in this blessed room . . .}
\end{align*}
\]

*In alchemy, the sun was described as the father of gold.

Structure of the Play

“Volpone” has a main plot and a subplot, which was very typical for plays of that time. The main plot reveals the characters obsessed with greed, and the subplot “attacks” another vice – that of vanity. It bears the typical characteristics of Jonson’s drama. The action takes place over the course of one day (in seventeenth century Venice). Jonson was an Italophile (a person who admires Italian customs, traditions, etc), though back then, Venice was considered to be the centre of sin and corruption. Characters are historically bound to their place and time and each one of them represents a human trait or eccentricity.

Volpone, whose name means fox, is a rich man who makes “good” use of his leisure time. He is not married and childless which makes him a perfect target for
legacy hunters. He pretends to be sick and on the verge of dying, so as to delude people and make them wish for becoming his heirs.

**Volpone is the epitome of greed and hedonism**: he enjoys pleasure in all of its manifestations and indulges in the way he deceives three gullible men, all of them bearing the names of predatory birds – Voltore (from Italian – meaning vulture), Corbaccio (raven) and Corvino (crow). Thus greed is presented as “a characteristic of the society as a whole”. But the difference between Volpone and his would-be heirs is that Volpone is greedy not only for wealth, but for “gaining more power over his victims”. The protagonist is very much contented that he receives gifts, but what gives him real satisfaction is the fact that his plans for manipulating people into giving him presents work very well.

**Hypocrisy** is yet another vice that has spread like a disease in the Venice society of that time. It is a potent tool for achieving one’s goals and it goes hand in hand with the unlimited greed of some of the characters. Everybody starts lying as soon as they realize that they can take advantage of their lies. The three men’s desire to get their hands on Volpone’s money make them pretend that they are concerned about Volpone’s health. And they are, indeed, though it is not improvement, but deterioration of his health that will relieve their anxiety. The dialogue between Volpone and Voltore is a perfect example of the “trickster tricked” idea:

\[
\text{You are so wise, so prudent-and 'tis fit} \\
\text{That wealth and wisdom still should go together. (Act-V, sc.X)}
\]

The subplot is “directed towards Italophile Englishmen” (like Jonson himself) who travelled to Italy to know its civilization. But these people are endangered by succumbing to the corrupt manners of the society. Sir Politic Would-be and his wife are two examples of how simple-minded people are easily corrupted once they are influenced by the Italian way of life.

**The Argument**: The play begins with an Argument defining the real meaning of the *Volpone*

\[
\text{V for Volpone,} \\
\text{O for offers,} \\
\text{L for lies,} \\
\text{P for presents,} \\
\text{O for others,} \\
\text{N for new tricks and} \\
\text{E for each tempts.}
\]
The two main characters of the play are first introduced. Volpone, which means "fox" in Italian, and Mosca, which means "fly" in Italian, are both appropriately named in keeping with the theme of Animalization. Right away, the reader or viewer is alerted to the characters' status as allegorical, which invites us to consider the play as much as a fable of entertainment. This suits Jonson's stated moral intention.

The Prologue: In the Prologue, Jonson notes that he observes the laws of time, place, and persons. Here he is referring to the Classical Unities, three dramatic conventions which derive from Aristotle's *Poetics*. They are the unity of time: the play's action begins and ends within 24 hours - the unity of place, - the play's action occurs in a single setting or a reasonably confined area - and the unity of action - the play's action centers around one main conflict or plotline.

Conclusion

Nicholas Rowe suggests that though Jonson was a more learned man and a better scholar than Shakespeare. But Shakespeare was endowed with a natural gift of imagination far greater than any amount of careful study could attain.

Others like John Dennis have praised Jonson’s dramatic craft for its capacity to expose the ridiculousness of human behaviour in the major characters of his plays. Writers like Alexander Pope observed that Jonson was the first playwright to bring critical learning in vogue on the English stage, guiding his audience, albeit with some artifice through prologues and declamations, on how to respond to characters and situations.

Contemporary critics like Rosalind Miles have pointed out that Jonson attempted to create an “ideal audience”, one that would “share his standards and accept his assessments”, while others like A.D. Cousin point to his inevitable dependence on the very men and women whose character he sought to create and improve. Richard Dutton, on the other hand, has critically examined the complex relationship between Volpone and Mosca in the light of the rules of patronage in seventeenth century England, detecting contrary impulses of loyalty and resentment in their equation.

**Courtesy: Dr. Md. Ejaz Alam**