

Ben Jonson's *Volpone*: black comedy from the dawn of the modern era

Stephen Griffiths
24 June 2003

In response to the Sydney Theatre Company's (STC) production of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* last year, I determined to undertake a study of the life and work of this extraordinary playwright and poet. Although his work is seldom performed these days, Jonson was one of the leading protagonists in the most vibrant period of early English theatre. For a time, he was considered the virtual Poet Laureate of England. His literary stature rivalled, and for the century after his death, even overshadowed that of Shakespeare.

Volpone is recognised as one of Jonson's major works. Some 400 years after it was written, the play, about compulsive acquisitiveness and abuse of privilege, still resonates with its audience. The characters—or caricatures—remain recognisable, as does Jonson's exposure of the pomposity of the legal system and the hypocrisy of wealthy lawyers who are prepared to argue anything for a price.

Understanding Jonson's life and work proved to be more difficult than I imagined. Although much has been written on the subject, most of it divorces the playwright and his plays from their historical context in England and the wider social and political ferment that was underway in Europe. Jonson, like his literary creation *Volpone*, was very much larger than life. But he can be easily lost in an examination of the minutiae of his work.

I hope that in my preliminary investigations, I have managed to avoid this pitfall.

Jonson's life story reads like a tragic novel. Born in London the posthumous son of a clergyman and trained by his stepfather as a bricklayer, Jonson became a mercenary, then an actor and leading playwright. At the height of his career, he was unchallenged in his chosen profession and a companion to some of the leading figures of his day. But he died virtually alone and impoverished eight years after suffering a debilitating stroke. He was buried beneath Westminster Abbey under the inscription "O Rare Ben Johnson".

Jonson's life spanned the years 1573 to 1637, a period of extraordinary change in English society: from the latter years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I through to the eve of the English Civil War in 1642. Passionate and volatile, he was a man with a clear eye for the world around him. His plays are noted for their satirical view of the modern—capitalist—class relations that were beginning to develop.

Bourgeois monetary relations were breaking down the old feudal ties that had existed in England and which had been grounded in a largely subsistence agricultural economy. London was experiencing an explosive expansion—a process driven by the impact of trade and the early market economy. A century before *Volpone* was written, the city's population numbered just 60,000. By the time of the play's first performance in 1606, it had more than trebled to over 200,000. London was soon to become Europe's largest city.

The growth continued despite bouts of the plague and other epidemics. In the years 1603 and 1625, for example, between one fifth and one quarter of the residents died from disease. One of Jonson's later major

works, *The Alchemist*, is set in London during an outbreak of the plague and concerns a wealthy home owner who has fled the capital, leaving the servants in charge of his city mansion.

The expansion of trade along the Thames, and the broadening power of the royal court led to a London property boom. England's foreign trade, which extended from Russia to the Mediterranean and the New World, grew tenfold between 1610 and 1640.

Economic growth was also accompanied by deepening social inequality. The real wage of carpenters, for instance, halved from Elizabeth's reign to that of Charles I. Side by side with opulent wealth were squalid tenements. Yet the poor from elsewhere in the country and from continental Europe were drawn to London by the prospect of wages that were more than 50 percent higher than the rest of southern England.

The city became a place of business and of fashion for the rural-based aristocracy, and Jonson parodies in some of his plays the tendency of young aristocrats to sell acres of their land to pay for city fineries. London was the heart of the royal court and the state bureaucracy. At any time over a thousand gentlemen connected with parliament or the law courts could be found residing at the city's inns.

These inns became a hub of intellectual ferment where writers and actors like Jonson met with merchants, gentlemen and other leading figures of the day. Jonson dedicated his first major work, *Every Man In His Humour*, to these inns, calling them "the noblest nurseries of humanity and liberty in the kingdom".

London's economic expansion and the aggregation of so many and varied social elements stimulated the cultural development expressed in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. At the same time, the social tensions brewing within the growing metropolis created a receptive audience for the satire for which Jonson was to become famous.

Established theatre was still a relatively new phenomenon in sixteenth century England. The first permanent legal theatre was established up in London in 1552. Before that, performances were carried out on temporary platforms set up in taverns and inns. Entertainment at the new venues ranged from bear baiting to performances for the royal court.

Jonson was almost a generation younger than the major Elizabethan writers Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare who led the theatrical exploration of new aspects of the human experience. He records his appreciation of Shakespeare in a poem where he notes that "he was not of an age but for all time."

The first mention of Jonson in the theatre comes in 1597 in a note for a four-pound loan given to him for his work as an actor by the entrepreneur William Henslowe. That same year Jonson was imprisoned for his part in writing a play called *The Isle of Dogs*, a satirical work mocking the Scots.

Released soon after, Jonson quickly became better known for his writing than his acting, producing works for the leading theatres of the day. *Every Man in His Humour*, finished in late 1598, established him as a major writer of comedy and satire. Its first performance was at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

But Jonson was again imprisoned, this time for killing an associate actor in a duel. He was acquitted only after successfully pleading “benefit of clergy”—a law allowing for the pardoning of defendants due to their literacy.

Jonson was one of the most educated writers of the day. He had a profound knowledge of Latin and Greek theatre and poetry and, like many artists of the period, he developed his work within the framework established by the classics. In all the arts and sciences, the heritage of Greece and Rome was being rediscovered and re-assimilated.

The English Renaissance writers reworked classical, traditional and contemporary stories. Shakespeare, for example, reworked an already rephrased English translation of an Italian story for his *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), which the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega retold as a tragicomedy in 1608. Christopher Marlowe’s epic poem *Hero and Leander*, which is based on an ancient Greek myth, says more about the customs of contemporary England than of the ancient Greeks. The art was in the telling, not in the creation, of the stories.

Jonson is often accused of being constricted in his writing by classical references. But he was in no way overawed by the classics. In fact, part of his creative genius was his ability to rework themes and ideas to fit the contemporary setting. Many of the sources were so seamlessly integrated into his stories that only after centuries of scholarship were the connections established between his work and that of earlier writers.

He drew directly on ancient mythology in his masques for the royal court. Masques were highly stylised theatrical events performed for and by the members of the aristocracy. With Jonson and his sometime collaborator, architect Inigo Jones, the masque developed from a relatively simplistic entertainment into an elaborate (although rather self indulgent and hugely expensive) art form.

The playwright was also influenced by European theatre, particularly the Italian Commedia dell’arte. Commedia dell’arte troupes had toured London in the late 1590s and a number of the characters in *Volpone* have their direct counterparts in this Italian theatrical form. Jonson’s *Volpone*, for example, fits well within the range of the Commedia’s *Pantalone*, whose character ranged from a miserly and ineffectual old man to an energetic cuckold with “almost animal ferocity and agility”. In the play, Jonson integrates this influence with classical references, as well as English and European folk mythology and theatrical styles.

Jonson also drew on the English tradition of medieval morality plays, where actors personified human characteristics such as Virtue, Vice, Lechery or Curiosity to illustrate moral lessons. The plots were generally limited, since the moral points were universal rather than specific.

Jonson welded all these influences into a theatre that was purposeful and aimed at playing a critical role in society. His comedies brought a new realism as well as a sharp eye for outlining human character types. As one writer commented, he gave “a new sense of the interdependence of character and society”.

While *Volpone* was set in Venice, London audiences were well able to recognise its themes. For his realism, Jonson was attacked at the time as “a meere Empryck, one that gets what he hath by observation”. But four centuries on, his ability to capture social contradictions and present them in a captivating form continues to resonate.

Through the play, considered by some his masterpiece, Jonson portrays with a black humour a society in which the pursuit of wealth and individual self-interest have become primary. Venice was regarded as the epitome of a sophisticated commercial city and virtually all the characters are revealed as corrupt or compromised.

Volpone means “fox” in Italian. Jonson based his story around medieval and Aesopian tales in which a fox pretends to be dead in order to catch the carrion birds that come to feed on its carcass. In the play, *Volpone* is a single and aging Venetian “magnifico” who has devised a trick to fleece his neighbours while simultaneously nourishing his sense of superiority

over his hapless victims. For three years he has pretended to be dying, so as to encourage legacy hunters to bring gifts in the hope of being named as his beneficiary.

With the aid of his servant Mosca, *Volpone* strings along his suitors—*Voltore*, *Corbaccio* and *Corvino*—extracting their wealth by feeding their avarice. (*Voltore*, *Corbaccio* and *Corvino* are the Italian names for vulture, crow and raven.) *Voltore*, a lawyer, offers *Volpone* a platter made of precious metal. *Corbaccio*, a doddering gentleman, is talked into disinheriting his son *Bonario* in favour of *Volpone*, while *Corvino*, a miserly merchant and hugely jealous husband, is driven by greed to offer his young wife *Celia* to bed and comfort the supposedly dying *Volpone*.

Here *Volpone*, a rogue whose victims trap themselves by their own weaknesses (and are therefore deserving of their respective fates) becomes overwhelmed by his own passions. Definitely not at death’s door and completely obsessed, he tries to force himself onto *Celia* and is only stopped by the lucky appearance of *Bonario*. The two innocents bring charges in court against the old man. But countercharges of adultery and fornication against *Celia* and *Bonario* are laid by the three legacy hunters who are desperate to defend what each considers his own future wealth.

Volpone revels in these ever-widening displays of degradation. He decides to stage his own death so he can witness their frenzy when they see him bequeathing his wealth to *Mosca*. However, after *Mosca* begins preparing the elaborate funeral, he ceases to acknowledge his former master. As the heir to *Volpone*’s great wealth, *Mosca* is transformed in the eyes of the courtroom judges—who are as self-serving as the rest—from a lowly servant into an eligible young man to whom they might marry their daughters.

Desperate not to be outfoxed by his servant, *Volpone* reveals himself, thus exposing his own and everyone else’s guilt. He is stripped of his wealth, which is given to charity, and sentenced to prison, while *Mosca* is condemned to the galleys for passing himself off as a person of breeding. *Voltore*, the advocate, is debarred from the court and *Corbaccio*’s wealth is transferred to his son *Bonario*. *Corvino* is paraded through Venice as an ass, while his wife *Celia* is sent home to her family with triple her dowry.

Jonson skillfully manipulates the audience so that it identifies with *Volpone* and his brazen schemes. The old *magnifico*’s zest is infective and the audience is swept along with his machinations only to find itself, along with the anti-hero, hovering at the edge of criminality. In this way, the author tries to confront us with the dangers of unrestrained self-interest and with what Jonson considers to be a necessary sense of social responsibility.

Ben Jonson’s realism relates to his view of the role of artist/poet in society. As a child, he had been fortunate to attend Westminster School, where he came under the influence of the noted historian and antiquarian William Camden. There he embraced the humanist outlook of the Renaissance, which emphasised respect for the dignity and rights of man and the idea that knowledge advanced the human condition.

This was a time of political and social convulsion throughout Europe. The humanist ideas of the Renaissance were followed by the Reformation. Within the framework of the day, Jonson was no radical. Like others, he viewed the absolute monarchy, balanced between the old aristocracy and the emerging capitalist class, as a guarantor of culture against the challenge from parliament and the Puritan church. Along with figures like Sir Francis Bacon, he distrusted parliament as a vehicle for the self-interest of landowners, merchants and their agents.

In his posthumously published writings—*Timber: or, Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter: As they have flow’d out of his daily Readings; or had their reflux to his peculiar Notion of the Times*—Jonson wrote: “*Suffrages* in Parliament are numbred, not weigh’d: nor can it bee otherwise in those publike *Councels*, where nothing is so unequall, as the equality: for there, how odde soever mens braines, or wisdomes are, their

power is always even, and the same.”

In a Europe that was still struggling to reappropriate the intellectual conquests of the classical civilisations, and where the vast majority had little or no education, Jonson’s emphasis on the differing “weight” of people’s opinions was at least understandable. In his view, the monarchy provided an environment in which learning and culture could develop. In turn, that enlightened climate would nurture an enlightened and benevolent monarch.

Jonson wrote in *Timber*: “Learning needs rest: Sovereignty gives it. Sovereignty needs counsell: Learning affords it. There is such a Consociation of offices, betweene the *Prince*, and whom his favour breeds, that they may helpe to sustaine his power, as hee their knowledge.” He added further on: “A *Prince* without Letters, is a Pilot without eyes ... And how can he be counsell’d that cannot see to read the best Counsellors (which are books).”

Jonson conceived his role as providing insight into the problems of the day. Thus, he approached society critically. His works are infused with a refusal to sidestep social contradictions. For Jonson, “*Truth* is mans proper good; and the onely *immortall* thing, was given to our mortality to use”. His creative function was to express the complexities of life and truth in a form that could be appreciated by the common man.

Jonson’s plays challenged the audience to examine the impact of a society governed by deceit and subterfuge. His strength lay in his ability to confront those watching with life as he saw it. In his ability to recreate theatrically the contemporary world and identify both general and specific aspects of the human experience, he was opening new ground that would be further explored in the ensuing centuries.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)