

Ben Jonson, Literary Style, and Presents Most Famous Plays

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Abstract

Drama has always fascinated audiences. Audiences have been captivated by dramatic presentations of the plights of others since antiquity, which not only satisfies their natural curiosity but also provides a platform from which dramatists can tackle pressing issues of the day and present them in a manner that is both easily understood and literately accessible. Many of Ben Jonson's plays, like *Volpone*, or *The Fox* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610), are caustic condemnations of prevailing societal norms. The famed British poet and dramatist Ben Jonson was born in London on 11 June 1572. His father, who was a priest, died just a month before his birth, and his mother promptly remarried again master bricklayer Robert Brett. After getting a classical education at school, Ben Jonson rose from an apprentice bricklayer and soldier to become one of the most acclaimed playwrights and poets of the 17th century. As a writer, he had a troubled beginning, having spent time in prison for writing a controversial play and then murdered another actor shortly after his release. Jonson was a contentious figure due to the extent to which he satirised the English upper classes as he grew in stature. Although he never entirely reconciled himself to English authority, his talent as a dramatist and courtier earned him a pension from King James I and, in effect, the position of unofficial Poet Laureate of England. He brought to the fore the comedy of humor. The current study aims to study the English Playwright Ben Johnson, commenting on his literary style, and presents his most famous plays *Volpone*, or *The Fox* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610). The research paper falls into introduction, two sections, and a conclusion which sums the whole findings.

Keywords: Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, or the *Fox*, *The Alchemist*, City Comedy, Satire

Introduction

Beginning in the late 1570s, he was a student at Westminster School, where the well-known historian William Camden served as his instructor. Jonson was unable to attend university; therefore, his years at Westminster were the most formative of his education. During this period, he developed a love for the writings of classical authors such as the Roman poet Horace. Jonson entered the military after graduating from Westminster and served in the Netherlands. He also worked as a bricklayer for his stepfather at this time. He tied the knot with Anne Lewis in 1594.

Jonson's poems "On my first daughter" and "On my first sonne" commemorate the tragic events surrounding the deaths of his and his wife's children Mary and Benjamin.

Jonson began his theatrical career as an actor, but quickly turned his concentration to playwriting. *The Case is Altered*, his first surviving play, was played in 1597, while *Every*

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Man in His Humour, his first play to become a sensation, was performed in 1598. Both of these pieces were urban-based sophisticated comedy. Jonson composed and performed the comedies that made him famous, notably *Volpone* (1606), *The Alchemist* (1610), and *Bartholomew Fair* (1612).

Jonson's lengthy literary affiliation with the Stuarts began with the coronation of King James I in 1603. This signified the start of the partnership. Together with the theatrical designer Inigo Jones, he developed a huge number of entertainments for the royal family throughout the preceding four decades. Despite having a significant number of long-lasting connections, it appears that Jonson was a controversial individual with a thin skin. His close friend William Drummond described him as "a great lover and praiser of himself" (Qtd. in Donaldson). In 1598, he engaged in a duel that resulted in the death of his opponent. He almost escaped the death penalty for manslaughter. In the viciously satirical play *Poetaster*, Jonson took aim at his peers in the playwriting profession who poked light of his career as a bricklayer and his superiority complex (c. 1601). His connection with Jones at the Stuart court was eventually permanently ruined due to their animosity.

In 1616, Jonson was responsible for the publication of his *Workes*. This collection contained some of his plays, as well as several of his entertainments and poems. This landmark collection laid the framework for the 1623 posthumous publishing of the First Folio of William Shakespeare's works. Jonson was awarded a royal stipend, and following the death of William Shakespeare, he was largely regarded as England's finest living author. The pension was his reward for his labour. In 1616, the same year that Shakespeare died, Jonson was awarded a royal stipend of one hundred marks (about seventy pounds) per year. This made him the first poet laureate of England. In the same year, he published a gorgeous folio edition of his collected Works, so exhibiting the prestige connected with the profession of author. In addition to composing for the public playhouses, he was the court's foremost masque writer (Hackett, 114).

He took pleasure in his position as the principal playwright of the Jacobean court; nonetheless, much of his writing reveals the sleazy and dirty reality of London in his day, and he enjoys the vernacular vibrancy of its lexicon. He frequently acknowledged the ancient rules of theatre, in the Prologue to *Volpone*, he professes (1606): "The laws of time, place, persons he observeth, / from no needful rule he swerveth". (Johnson, i) In addition, he declared that his objective was to depict nature authentically by sticking to the ideals of proportion and realism. In none of his creations should Nature be terrified, he felt confident. Nevertheless, despite Jonson's respect for order, discipline, and realism, his works frequently demonstrate a persistent appreciation for the extravagant, grotesque, mad, and bizarre. It is probable that he suffered a stroke that left him paralysed in the same year. He went suddenly on August 6, 1637, and was interred in Westminster Abbey.

Volpone, or Fox:

The stinging portrayal of human greed, self-interest, selfishness, and desire that can be found in Ben Jonson's most performed play, *Volpone*, is just as cutting now as it was when the piece was created in 1606. The play takes place in Venice and is both a city comedy and a type of beast story. In it, the wily and gold-obsessed trickster *Volpone* (or 'fox') and his clever sidekick *Mosca* (or 'fly' or 'parasite') take advantage of a variety of naive Venetians and foreigners. For the first time since Christopher Marlowe's death, William Shakespeare had a genuine dramatic enemy in the character of *Volpone*, and with the arrival of *Volpone*, Elizabethan theatre acquired a crucial alternative method and material. Ben Jonson, the maestro of urban satire humour, dramatised the harsh and ugly reality of everyday existence. In addition, he applied the classically derived standards of dramatic composition to Elizabethan England's chaotic and heterogeneous lifestyle. For the following two centuries,

these norms will determine neoclassical theatrical ideals. According to Abrams and Harpham, satirical comedy tackles deviations from the existing social order by making transgressors of its moral or etiquette rules appear ludicrous (55).

According to Rosalind Miles in his critical book *Ben Jonson: His Craft and Art*, the play illustrates Jonson's newfound capacity to exploit human cruelty and frailty as the basis for satirical humour. This material is not inherently humorous; rather, it serves as the play's framework. Jonson manages to make comical seemingly unfunny issues, such as excessive greed and desire, as well as a barbarian disregard for all other humans and, ultimately, one's own chances of survival (70).

The play centres on Volpone, the Fox, a Renaissance Venetian schemer, and his servant, Mosca, who con people into giving them money by making it seem like Volpone is dying and needs an heir. Mosca is an insect. Volpone invokes gold in the beginning of the play, establishing the theme of greed that will carry throughout the play.

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.
Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is
The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun
O thou son of Sol,
But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,
With adoration, thee, and every relic
Of sacred treasure in this blessed room
Riches, the dumb god, that gives all men tongues,
That canst do nought, and yet mak'st men do all things,
The price of souls; even hell, with thee to boot,
Is made worth heaven. Thou art virtue, fame,
Honor and all things else. Who can get thee,
He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise— (I. i. 1-14)

Thus, Volpone's daily devotion — his sacrilegious worship at a gilded temple from whence all advantages radiate — sets the setting for the greed-driven trapping of three birds of prey. This is because Volpone worships at the shrine contrary to the shrine's inherent purpose. Attorney Voltore (crow), old gentleman Corbaccio (vulture), and businessman Corvino (crow) The allegorical composition recalls the mediaeval beast fable in which a fox pretends to be dead in order to hunt and eat carrion birds; however, in this case, the fox is motivated by an insatiable desire for wealth rather than a want for food. In exchange for their presents, each guest is assured that Volpone would choose them to inherit his fortune if the items they have brought him continue to win his favour. Corvino, whose young wife Volpone covets her beauty and virtue, wants to send Celia to Volpone's bed for therapeutic purposes. According to reports, Volpone is old and impotent. It is suggested that Corbaccio disinherits his son and transfer his money to Volpone, while Corvino is instructed to deliver Celia for medical purposes to the supposedly elderly and impotent Volpone. Volpone and Mosca tower above the dimwitted and unimaginative prey because they are brilliant and polished performers who are completely adaptive to their audience and thoroughly absorbed by their roles. Their thirst for deceit and intrigue will ultimately lead to their demise because it will eventually lead to their demise.

Jonson adds the uneducated Sir Politic Wannabe and his wife, two English visitors whose exaggerated sense of self-importance demonstrates how easily morons may be influenced by self-centered ideals. Jonson introduces these people to soften and widen the

play's searing criticism on greed. The most noteworthy part of this arrangement is Jonson's choice to centre the play on a comic antihero and the parasite that infects him. Since Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, it was common for Elizabethan tragedies to have monstrous characters; yet, few Elizabethan comedies had the courage to submit so completely to the antagonist and his sidekick. The sole occupants of the world shown in *Volpone* are scoundrels, gulls, and the defenceless victims of both. In this section, Jonson makes his satirical point indirectly. Jonson multiplies and exaggerates via caricature avarice, dishonesty, and self-deception to shame his audience into rejecting these false principles through mockery. Jonson's game plan as a strategist relies heavily on the premise that the characters' greed would ultimately lead to their own downfall. Volpone proclaims, "What a rare punishment / Is avarice to itself." (I. vi. 77-78).

Volpone celebrates his anticipated legal victory by proving his supremacy over the gullible individuals who lied on his behalf. He pretends to be deceased and to have left his riches to Mosca so he may observe the reactions of his victims when they find they have been duped. Volpone is eventually undone not by covetousness but by hubris, as Mosca, who proves to be only devoted to money, tries to retain the inheritance. Volpone must uncover the conspiracy and his own deceptions in order to reclaim it. Voltore recants his false evidence when the court reconvenes, and Volpone removes his mask and reveals everyone, including himself, as it looks he has been defeated by Mosca. The truth is disclosed and order is restored not by a massive force of good, but by the confession of the play's principal adversary, who risks his own safety for revenge. Mosca, who will be a galley slave for life, and Volpone, who will be incarcerated until he becomes the cripple he feigned to be, will suffer the worst punishments for their crimes. One of the Avocatori reveals vehemently:

Let all that see these vices thus rewarded,
Take heart, and love study 'em! Mischiefs feed
Like beasts, till they be fat, and then they bleed (IV. xi. 88-90).

However, there is no moral consolation to be found in the wisdom of authority, the power of justice, or the moral influence of virtue over cravings for self-sufficiency in this situation. The bold and brazen humour of Jonson, which grotesquely and ridiculously exaggerates our worst traits, is converted into a mirror that causes us to recognise unpleasant and disturbing parallels between ourselves and the characters in the play. Jonson contributes to the establishment of theatre as a tool for both truth and moral education, while also delighting in the mastery of his building and the daring of his vision. He does this by changing the focus of humour away from the usually linked dreamy and lovely desire fulfilment and toward reality.

The Alchemist

Ben Jonson's 1610 comedy in five acts, *The Alchemist*, was performed and published in 1612. *The Alchemist*, like *Volpone*, is a withering parody of human stupidity and greed: Subtle, Face and Doll's naïve patrons are not only swindled, but also punished in ways suited to their specific vices and hypocrisies. Face, a London servant and con artist, arrives at the opening of the play with his accomplices, Subtle and Doll Common. Due to a plague epidemic, Face's master, Lovewit, has fled the city for his country estate, and Face is running a criminal organisation out of Lovewit's city house in his absence. They are awaiting the arrival of their first victim of the day, a legal clerk named Dapper. Face has convinced Dapper that Subtle is a well-respected mystic and doctor of alchemy so that Dapper might obtain a "familiar" that would assist him in winning at cards and gambling. Face, disguised as a captain, welcomes Dapper onto the ship. Subtle informs Dapper that he can conjure him a "familiar," but Dapper is apprehensive. Subtle states that alchemical magic cannot be used for

such wicked purposes, but Dapper pleads and promises to give Subtle and Face half of his wealth. Subtle concurs and advises Dapper that he must see the "Fairy Queen" to obtain his "familiar" and that she does not rise until the afternoon. He must return, but only once the rite has been performed. Three drops of vinegar are to be applied to Dapper's nose, two drops to his mouth, and one drop to each eye. Then, he must "hum" and "buzz" three times and cleanse his fingertips and eyes. Dapper agrees and rushes home immediately.

Next is Abel Drugger, a local trader who wants advice from Subtle for his new business. He asks Subtle where he should place his door and shelves and how he should organise his possessions for success. To attract customers, Subtle proposes to Drugger that his new company should face south and that he should install a magnet beneath the threshold of his front door. According to him, Drugger was born under a "special star" and would have tremendous professional and personal success. Drugger is so fortunate, according to Subtle, that he may get the philosopher's stone, a rare alchemical element supposed to transform base metals into gold and generate the elixir of life, which promises endless youth and life. The drug dealer tosses a fistful of cash to Subtle before dashing out the door. Face seems to be Subdued. Face believes that he deserves a bigger share of the earnings because he is responsible for recruiting "suckers" like Abel Drugger.

Next are Sir Epicure Mammon and his friend Surly. Mammon believes that Subtle is attempting to create the philosopher's stone for him, and as a result, he has been acting as if he already had it. Mammon will change himself into a wealthy man with the assistance of the stone, and he will utilise his newfound power to heal the sick and put an end to the epidemic. Mammon is certain that the philosopher's stone, Face, and Subtle are all genuine, despite Surly's disbelief in the efficacy of the philosopher's stone and his belief that Face and Subtle are con artists. Face, posing as an alchemist's helper, welcomes them and informs them that Subtle is now engaged in "projection," one of the final steps of the alchemical process, which is followed by the formation of the stone. Face is informed by Mammon of his plans for the elixir, which he intends to utilise to enhance his sexual prowess. Face is informed of his plans by Mammon. Every night, he will have sex with fifty different women, and his bedroom will be lined with mirrors in such a way that his reflection will be amplified as he walks naked through his "succubae." After that, Subtle gives Mammon some instructions, telling him to go back home and get all of his metal and iron goods before they take part in what is known as "projection." Another attempt is made by Surly to bring to Mammon's notice the fact that Face and Subtle are con artists; however, Mammon's attention is drawn away from Surly by Doll, who has just entered the room. When Mammon comes back, you can be sure that he will immediately start seeking for her. Surly informs Mammon that it is obvious that Doll is a prostitute and that they are presently at a "bawdy house," but Mammon chooses to disregard this information. Surly also informs Mammon that they are currently at a "bawdy residence."

An Anabaptist by the name of Ananias approaches the door, knocks, and then enters in order to conduct commercial transactions with Mammon's metal and iron. Because Ananias is unhappy with Subtle and Face's use of arcane alchemical terminology, he refers to them as "heathens." Ananias responds that he and his fellows would not pay any more money to Subtle until they "witness projection." Subtle rejects Ananias, stating that he would only deal with Ananias' pastor in the future. Face appears with Drugger, who informs him of Dame Pliant's wealth. Dame Pliant and her brother Kestrel have come in town. Kestrel is seeking for someone to teach him how to debate and survive on his wits. Kestrel is also seeking a spouse for his sister, and will only permit her to wed a nobleman. Face informs Drugger that Subtle is the most intellectual guy in London and also has the ability to analyse Dame Pliant's

horoscope. Face lauds the widow enthusiastically to Subtle, and Drugger agrees to bring Dame Pliant and her brother to see them. They argue briefly over who will wed Dame Pliant before resolving to draw straws and not inform Doll.

Ananias and his pastor, Tribulation Wholesome, return. Men despise and mistrust Subtle and Face, and Tribulation describes Subtle as "antichristian"; nonetheless, they are prepared to do everything to get the philosopher's stone and further their holy cause. Tribulation apologises to Subtle for the preceding visit of Ananias. Subtle warns Tribulation that it will be many weeks before he can make the stone, but offers to teach them how to melt pewter and produce Dutch money in the meanwhile. Ananias is informed by Tribulation that he would consult with his brethren on the permissibility of giving money. Face appears and announces that he has just met a Spaniard who is eager to see Doll and will be there shortly. Doll reports that Dapper has returned for his "familiar" as the doorbell rings. Doll receives encouragement from Face to dress up as a "Fairy Queen" and get ready. When Subtle arrived, he presented himself as the "Priest of Fairy," and he gave Dapper the advice that he should empty his pockets before seeing the Queen. If Dapper is going to have any chance of seeing the Fairy, then Subtle and Face are going to have to blindfold him and put a petticoat on him. There is an abruptly another knock at the door. Face and Subtle are so concerned about the prospect of Dapper and Mammon getting together that they stuff a gingerbread biscuit down Dapper's throat and then flush him down the toilet.

Mammon arrives with his metals and inquires about the location of Subtle. Following Face's explanation to Mammon that he is now preoccupied in his laboratory, the latter asks about Doll's whereabouts. Doll is described as a "distinctive scholar" by Face, who also claims that she is the sister of an aristocracy and that she has lost her mind as a result of reading the works of a Puritan scholar. Mammon must avoid bringing up religion and must keep their introduction secret; if Subtle believes that Mammon has evil intentions, Face will not give the stone to Mammon. Face has promised to introduce Mammon to Doll, but Mammon must avoid bringing up religion and must keep their introduction secret. After some further flattery from Mammon, Doll walks through the door, and the two of them head out to the garden for some additional privacy. Following that, Subtle, Kestrel, and Dame Pliant go through the door. Kestrel will learn the skill of wit from Subtle, but only after he has first made the acquaintance of Dame Pliant. He then pretends to read her palm while kissing her, claiming that she would soon wed a member of the aristocracy and making the prediction. While Face and the Spaniard are making their way to the office, Subtle is bringing Kestrel and Dame Pliant there so that he may begin training Kestrel and read Dame Pliant's fate. Face and the Spaniard arrive at the same time.

The Spaniard is actually Surly in disguise, but Subtle and Face do not appear to have noticed. Face, Kestrel, and Subtle leave the scene, while Doll and Mammon enter. Mammon is unable of calming Doll's extreme craziness. Face accompanies Doll out of the room, followed by Subtle, who is infuriated by Mammon's blatantly sexual conduct with Doll. According to him, Mammon's activities will cause a one-month delay in "projections." There is a massive explosion in the adjacent chamber, and Face reports that the stone has gone on fire.

Many researchers view the play as ethically instructive, although they disagree as to what the lesson is. Some, focusing on Subtle, Doll, and Face, cite the disintegration of their endeavour trio as evidence that crime never pays — not even funny, well-designed criminality. Others see the lesson as a satirical criticism of the play's gallery of fools, such as Mammon, Kastril, and Drugger, whose greed and naivety lead them to do absurd follies. Another school of thought contends that the play's critique of metatheatrical performance serves as a caution against the seductive nature of theatre. (Rasmussen & DeJong, 2017).

Face and Subtle are the protagonists of the play. They con people living in London by pretending to be accomplished alchemists who have knowledge of the philosopher's stone so that they may take money and stray metal from them. Face and Subtle have a tight working relationship with Doll, a prostitute who assists them in luring their victims and defrauding them. Each of the "gulls" that they prey upon is interested in alchemy and the philosopher's stone for self-serving reasons, such as increasing their own fortune or sexual prowess, among other similar reasons. Jonson asserts in the play's prologue that it is situated in London as "No clime breeds better matter for your whore, / Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more." (I. iii. 34) Face and Subtle are the protagonists of the play. They pose as expert alchemists who have information on the philosopher's stone so that they may steal money and loose metal from Londoners who are easily taken in by their story. Face and Subtle work closely together with Doll, a prostitute who assists them in enticing and defrauding their victims, and Face and Subtle work closely with Doll. Each of the "gulls" that they prey upon is interested in alchemy and the philosopher's stone for their own egotistical motives, such as the desire to amass personal wealth or enhance their sexual prowess. Jonson asserts in the play's prologue that it is situated in London.

Conclusion

Ben Jonson is usually recognised as the second most significant English playwright during James I reign, behind William Shakespeare. Of his most remarkably magnificent plays are *Volpone* (1605), *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), *Epicoene; or, The Alchemist* (1610), *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), and *The Silent Woman* (1609). Ben Jonson scrutinizes in his plays how humans might be influenced by unusual elements that alter their behaviour in any situation. As he developed as a playwright, Jonson went deeper into character analysis, as is shown in his 1610 play *The Alchemist*. In addition, Jonson, more than any other English playwright, was crucial in establishing plays as literature, capable of the most rigorous investigation of human nature and social life. This was something that Jonson did to a greater extent than any other English dramatist. He, once, divulged in the prologue to *Every Man in His Humour* that he intends to the real language and deeds of man in real life.

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