

The Intertextualities of Ben Jonson's
Volpone

JAMES TULIP

The relation of Marlowe, Shakespeare and Jonson is surely one of the great subjects of English literary and cultural history. To have in the space of some twenty-five to thirty years such a concentration of genius is remarkable. The shift from the earlier medieval and Morality stages in later Elizabethan times is so striking as to be seen by many to deny any real continuity. The break at the other end after 1620 is equally remarkable. There was clearly a sustained high point of English cultural history from 1585 to 1620 which the medium of the theatre captured, preeminently in Marlowe, Shakespeare and Jonson. In Marlowe we find innovation, in Shakespeare consolidation and in Jonson deconstruction. It is as if an organic and imaginative wholeness is working itself through these three powerful and distinctive talents. How to name this wholeness is the ultimate aim of a study of this kind. Here it is sufficient to set up approaches to this question largely through the retrospective view which Jonson's *Volpone*, coming late in the period of highest creativity, offers.

I

James Shapiro in his recent study *Rival Playwrights: Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare* (1991) has brought the topic back into focus, a focus which twentieth-century criticism with its concentration on discrete texts has blurred. Shapiro's approach is an eclectic one, bringing a wide range of scholarly and theoretical methods of argument into play in relation to his 'case studies' of 'Marlowe and Jonson', 'Shakespeare and Marlowe' and 'Jonson and Shakespeare'. The Notes to *Rival Playwrights* are an exemplary survey of modern literary scholarship on these topics, with particular use being made of methods of intertextuality and parody. Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence', Thomas M. Greene's 'dialectical imitation', Linda Hutcheon and

Margaret Rose on parody feed into Shapiro's study, while on Jonson Alvin Kernan, Robert Watson and Anne Barton contribute to Shapiro's sense of 'the ways that authors responded to personal rivals and specific plays'.¹

What emerges sharply from Shapiro's approach is the active and critical role of Jonson in recognizing what was happening in England at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Specifically in theatre, Jonson was able to see, and to salute, the achievements of the heroic stage which Marlowe and Shakespeare had brought about by the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign in 1603. Jonson was also able to see that this great phase of celebrating 'the death of kings' was at an end. 'Poetic fury and historic storms' is the sardonic comment of Peregrine in *Volpone*, a phrase that signals Jonson's deconstructive impulse in seeking to return English theatre to its traditional strengths in moral comedy. It is this ambivalent or two-sided response to his 'rivals' that marks Jonson's achievement in *Volpone*, viewed intertextually. The argument of this essay is, indeed, founded on the view that *Volpone* owes its origin and deep structure to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, and its more immediate stimulus in coming into being from the challenge of Shakespeare's tragedies in *Othello*, *King Lear* and possibly *Macbeth*.

The need to address the heroic pitch in *Volpone*, the elevation of language, the breadth of vision, the formalism and selfconscious theatricality is a critical issue which demands an intertextual approach. How farce challenges tragedy, and how tragedy elevates farce defines the nodal point that is *Volpone* in English stage and cultural history, the point where the old native traditions of the Morality play intersect with the dramaturgical sophistication learnt from the twenty years of Marlowe and Shakespeare's successes.

It is not often recognized what a leap *Volpone* represents in Jonson's own career. After his early success in 1598 with *Every Man in His Humour*, Jonson had a half-dozen years of

1 See James Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights: Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare* (Columbia, New York 1991), pp. 6, 13, 172-3, 188.

stage failures, and contentious ones at that. In 1603-4, however, *Sejanus*, in spite of its being a public disaster for Jonson, brought him close to the substance of what would be in *Volpone* his signal achievement. The master-servant relationship – self-originating, self-sustaining, self-exhausting – is there in both *Sejanus* and *Volpone*. Yet a wide gulf also separates them formally. *Sejanus* is discursive, *Volpone* is quintessentially dramatic. To explain this breakthrough for Jonson may be done only by sensing that Jonson suddenly saw what Shakespeare had done in *Othello*, particularly with Iago and the underside of the play, and beyond that of learning possibly the oldest lesson of the English stage tradition from medieval and Morality theatre, viz. the dramaturgy of the Vice.

The selfconscious theatricality for which *Volpone* has become famous (or infamous) in modern times on stage and in criticism is in fact a reversion to one of the central resources of the native English stage tradition. To look at a fourteenth-century Morality play such as *The Castle of Perseverance* is to see characters named Covetyse or Avarice and Backbiter, his offsider, prefigure *Volpone* and *Mosca* not only in what they do in seducing and gulling Mankind but also in the way they are aware of themselves in doing so, and of themselves as characters in relation to an audience. The need to self-project and to self-explain was basic in a dramaturgy where 'ideas' controlled 'actions', and where characters were transparent mediums for 'ideas' and had to name themselves according to these 'ideas' and establish a complicity with the audience for the entertainment of these 'ideas'. The fundamental transformation of moral idea as object into dramatic character as subject was a process that had been worked over for two to three centuries before Jonson.

A Morality play from the mid-sixteenth century such as Udall's *Respublica* (1553) offers a prototype for a wide range of issues germane to this study. The Vice called Avarice takes on the false name Policy to deceive and usurp the kingdom from Dame Respublica. The play is presented as a farce, but is intensely serious and polemical in

portraying the English Reformation as having usurped England until Queen Mary came to save the commonwealth. It is a very simple structure but one that seems to flow on into Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare's *Richard III* and Jonson's *Volpone*. The Vice, a malevolent but comic figure, in confessing himself to his audience had found for the English stage a way of being both object and subject. In *Volpone* Jonson did not have to reach back as far as medieval or Morality theatre for his model; it was there in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, *Iago* and *Edmund*, all 'glorious villains' yet in need of a new rationalization, as Jonson from the evidence of *Volpone* recognized.

Volpone is a mass of internal evidence of theatre imitating theatre. It is tempting to say that Jonson was not naturally a dramatist. He needed to imitate other dramatists. But the fact is that when in *Volpone* he discovered the secret of the English dramaturgical method of projecting and critiquing characters and situations, he exploited it to the full. So much so that T.S. Eliot in his famous 1919 essay on Jonson concludes: 'he never sacrifices the theatrical qualities – theatrical in the most favourable sense – to literature or to the study of character. His work is a titanic show'.² A certain irony surrounds Eliot's comment in the light of the above remarks and from a late twentieth-century vantage point. 'Theatrical qualities' in Jonson are not his unique achievement. As Shapiro's and other studies have shown, these qualities exemplify intertextuality and belong as much to the two decades of Marlowe and Shakespeare before Jonson, and to the two centuries before all of them on the English stage.

II

Jonson himself provides the best statement on how one writer may relate to another. In his prose work *Discoveries* he offers a comment on 'imitation' which is remarkable in itself but remarkable also for offering a point of entry into *Volpone* for its creative methods and intertextualities. Jonson writes:

2 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (Faber, 1961), p. 160.

The third requisite in our *Poet*, or *Maker*, is *Imitation*, to bee able to convert the substance, or Riches of an other *Poet*, to his owne use. To make choise of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him, till he grow very *Hee*: or, so like him, as the Copie may be mistaken for the Principall. Not, as a Creature, that swallowes, what it takes in, crude, raw, or indigested; but, that feedes with an Appetite, and hath a Stomacke to concoct, divide, and turne all into nourishment.³

Mosca, the parasite in *Volpone*, embodies these qualities, although when he gives his monologue on ‘the mystery’ of what it means to be a parasite in Act III he speaks more in the language of Shakespeare’s Ariel and Puck:

But your fine, elegant rascal, that can rise
 And stoop (almost together) like an arrow;
 Shoot through the air, as nimbly as a star;
 Turn short, as doth a swallow; and be here,
 And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;
 Present to any humour, all occasion;
 And change a visor swifter than a thought!
 This is the creature had the art born with him;
 Toils not to learn it, but doth practise it
 Out of most excellent nature: and such sparks
 Are the true parasites, others but their zanies.⁴

The stress on Mosca’s uniqueness here sits oddly with his role as parasite since he is the most dependent of creatures. Yet the deliberate comparisons through his similes ‘like an arrow’, ‘as a star’ and ‘as doth a swallow’ point to his awareness of relationships as his reality. Indeed, Jonson’s art is to make a necessity out of contingency, and in this sense the parasite embodies Jonson’s own artistic position.

A more intricate example of how Mosca can ‘imitate’ another person is early in *Volpone* where Mosca gives the lawyer Voltore an ironically flattering portrait of lawyers,

³ *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and P. Simpson, 11 vols (Oxford, 1925-52), viii. 638.

⁴ *Volpone*, III. i. 23-33, in *Five Plays*, ed. G. A. Wilkes (World’s Classics, Oxford 1992). All subsequent references to *Volpone* are to this edition. All quotations from Shakespeare are from the edition of Peter Alexander.

offering it as if it is his master Volpone's own high image of the profession. Mosca is in this instance imitating Volpone imitating Voltore. But the outcome is that Mosca gives a portrait of himself:

I oft have heard him say, how he admired
Men of your large profession, that could speak
To every cause, and things mere contraries,
Till they were hoarse again, yet all be law;
That, with most quick agility, could turn,
And re-turn; make knots, and undo them;
Give forked counsel; take provoking gold
On either hand, and put it up: these men,
He knew, would thrive, with their humility.

(I. iii. 52-60)

The reflexive nature of Jonson's wit in this passage, Mosca's way of seeming to strike off an object satirically yet returning to be expressive of himself as author and subject is at the centre of Jonson's method of creative imitation. Mosca 'feedes with an Appetite, and hath a Stomacke to concoct, divide, and turne all into nourishment'.

The role of the parasite in *Volpone* is therefore open to a wide reading and interpretation. Mosca, as the necessarily contingent creature, articulates relationships as reality. He picks up qualities from Shakespeare as in Lucio's 'I am a kind of burr, I shall stick' in *Measure for Measure*, and elevates them almost into an ideology. Edmund's celebrated defence of himself in *King Lear* and his 'bastardy' may have been the stimulus behind Jonson's development of Mosca to this degree. It is as if Jonson is abstracting and conceptualizing and uniquely enacting the elements of the socially marginalized figure so widely present in Jacobean drama, and here not only raising it to centrality in *Volpone* but making of it in Mosca something of a surrogate presence for himself and for his art.

To take this matter further, there is a teasing parallel between *King Lear* and Mosca to note. In Shakespeare's play, Lear having cursed Goneril to Regan in Act II, Scene iv turns to his second daughter in the following terms:

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No Regan, thou shalt never have my curse:
Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give
Thee o'er to harshness. Her eyes are fierce, but thine
Do comfort, and not burn. 'Tis not in thee
To grudge my pleasures, to cut off my train,
To bandy hasty words, to scant my sizes,
And in conclusion, to oppose the bolt
Against my coming in; thou better know'st
The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude;
Thy half o' th' kingdom hast thou not forgot,
Wherein I thee endow'd.

(II. iv. 168-79)

Lear is a feudal king projecting on to his daughter as his subject a role and code of behaviour which he is hoping she believes in but which in its idealized formalism – not to mention Regan's own deep disagreement with the values Lear is pushing upon her – is empty rhetoric.

Mosca in the opening scene of *Volpone* curiously handles his master in similar terms. He flatters in order to gain privileges for himself:

But your sweet nature doth abhor these courses;
You loathe the widow's, or the orphan's tears
Should wash your pavements; or their piteous cries
Ring in your roofs, and beat the air, for vengeance –
.....

You know the use of riches, and dare give, now,
From that bright heap, to me, your poor observer.

(I. i. 48-51, 62-63)

A common rhetorical pattern is being used by a King and a parasite. Jonson has elevated this least of social creatures to a level of heroic discourse. More generally, it is a sign of how the language of *Volpone* locates itself as part of the central discourse of the Jacobean stage; indeed, it is a sign that such a language exists and that Jonson has an acute ear and feeling for the dominant rhetoric of the day.

What Jonson adds as his own unique quality is a heightened sense of wit and irony such as we find in Mosca's deft asides and ambiguous comments. As, for example, when

dispatching Voltore, the first of Volpone's visitors, Mosca turns to his master and says: 'Betake you to your silence, and your sleep' and, as he sets Voltore's plate to one side: 'Stand there and multiply'. The ease with which Mosca utters these parodic blessings, biblical, liturgical in style yet thoroughly sardonic, is a measure of the ironic genius of Jonson. Any question, therefore, of parody and intertextuality between Jonson and Shakespeare has to be read as an interchange of equals, hugely different in orientations, yet each one maintaining a clear role in the debate, implicit largely, in which they were engaged between 1598 and 1613 concerning the nature and direction of English drama.

III

Jonson claimed in the Prologue to *Volpone* that he wrote the play, contrary to his public image of being a slow writer, with an astonishing speed: 'two months since, no feature ... five weeks fully penned it' (Prologue, 14, 16). Such a claim deserves some attention considering the length and the formal accomplishment of the play. It is as if Jonson is writing under a strong stimulus or for a deadline or special commission and with clear guidelines or a model to follow. Certainly the stimulus was there if it was the winter months of 1605-6 when he wrote *Volpone*. Jonson had just emerged from being jailed over the *Eastward Hoe* affair and the allegation of his and Chapman's slandering King James. Equally, he had been involved as a go-between for the Privy Council with the Catholic conspirators after the Gunpowder Plot of 5 November 1605. The time was something of a climax for him politically and socially. It is a marvel that so poised and ingenious a play as *Volpone* could have come from such a turbulent period of his career.

It seems right, therefore, to recall that *Volpone* was first performed, according to the 1616 Folio, in 1605 by the King's Majesty's Servants. That is to say, Jonson's comic masterpiece was first presented by Shakespeare's company, presumably on the Globe stage, at the height of Shakespeare's achievement as a tragic dramatist. The possibility that Jonson wrote *Volpone* immediately after *King*

Lear and that Jonson is in part responding to Shakespeare's great tragedy is something to consider. It would be plausible to suggest, also, that Jonson had Shakespeare's actors in mind; perhaps even that they had some hand in shaping the roles after the fashion of those they knew so well in Shakespeare. *Volpone* is full of quick short scenes and established stage routines; and while an Italian ambience is sufficiently realized, there is a generalized tenor to the proceedings for which ample precedent could be found on the English stage before Jonson.

Several examples of such precedents are clear. *Volpone*'s opening monologue recalls that of Barabas in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and even *Dr Faustus*. There is also the powerful opening monologue of *Richard III*, and before that of the Morality play *Respublica*. The master-and-servant or accomplice relationship of *Volpone* and Mosca is there in all these plays as well. Othello and Iago's more complex relationship may have been the catalyst for Jonson. His *Sejanus* was compared unfavourably to *Othello* at the time. Iago's implanting himself underneath the balcony of the bourgeois Brabantio and crying out: 'Awake! What, ho, Brabantio! Thieves, thieves, thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!' (*Othello*, I. i. 79-81) catches the spirit of both Barabas and *Volpone* in much the same situations. *Volpone* as the mountebank Scotto of Mantua is prefigured by Barabas as the French musician. A handkerchief dropped from a balcony in Venice leading to a husband's outburst of rage and jealousy may have teased members of the *Volpone* audience with recollections of *Othello* performed on the same stage and by the same actors a season or two before.

A situation of wider structural import occurs at the centre of *Volpone* when Mosca manipulates Celia into being the intermediary between *Volpone* and Corvino. It is as if Jonson is translating into farcical terms the great quadrilateral tragic situations of Shakespeare: Iago manipulating Desdemona to act as a go-between for Cassio to Othello; Polonius setting Ophelia between Hamlet and Claudius; Pandarus with Cressida and Troilus and Diomedes; Lucio and Isabella with

But more than this, there is in Nano's response an interesting recognition of scale as relevant to Jonson's concern. To see things little as if of dwarf size is to see things differently, morally and artistically. The expansive world of human experience in *King Lear* is being brought under conceptual control in *Volpone*. The personages and issues of the heroic stage are being remodelled and redirected under Jonson's hands and in relation to a new sense of art in the theatre. Jonson's *Volpone* marks a watershed alongside Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* in 1605 from medieval to modern worlds.

IV

To turn *King Lear* inside out, to look as if from a distance at the ideas and the motives of avarice and policy, of 'possession' and 'purchase', to foreground 'death' as a game, to see it not as an ultimate climax of life as in Shakespearean tragedy but as an ongoing and indeed energizing condition of life and society, to see furthermore the specific issue of inheritance and succession as a natural and necessary dynamic in the emerging capitalist culture and economy in seventeenth century England and Europe – these are the claims to be advanced for Jonson's *Volpone*, especially when seen alongside the heroic and historical interests of Shakespeare.

To look now in more detail at points of comparison between Shakespeare and Jonson is to become aware of the actors of the King's Men, and how surprised they must have been in performing *Volpone* to find themselves parodying their own best lines from the tragedies they had just made famous. If Burbage, for instance, played both the roles of Othello and Volpone, he might have wondered at himself play-acting dying on Volpone's sick bed:

I feel me going, uh, uh, uh, uh.
I am sailing to my port, uh, uh, uh, uh?
And I am glad, I am so near my haven.

(I. iii. 28-30)

He may have recalled Othello's lines:

Here is my journey's end, here is my butt,
And very sea-mark of my utmost sail.

(V. ii. 270-71)

Or the actor playing Corvino being given every chance to play off the Macbeth-like tragic stance:

If any man
But I had had this luck — The thing, in itself,
I know, is nothing —

(II. vi. 68-70)

and

what should I that am
So deeply in

and

I am bewitched, my crosses meet to vex me.

(II. vi. 6)

and Volpone also playing up the role of Macbeth's 'My way of life / Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf' (V. iii. 22-23):

'Tis a vain labour, e'en to fight 'gainst heaven;
Applying fire to a stone: (uh, uh, uh, uh)
Making a dead leaf grow again.

(III. vii. 83-5)

The stage resonances of Lear's great 'Howl, howl, howl' are caught in Corvino's 'How, how, how, how' and deflated further in Mosca's response 'Why, sir, with Scoto's oil'. And in a more extended and traumatic vein, Corvino's cursing of his wife Celia is a Jonsonian parallel to Lear's misogynist utterances on his daughters:

Death! I will buy some slave,
Whom I will kill, and bind thee to him, alive;
And at my window hang you forth: devising
Some monstrous crime, which I, in capital letters,
Will eat into thy flesh, with aqua-fortis,
And burning corsives, on this stubborn breast.
Now, by the blood thou has incensed, I'll do't.

(III. vii. 100-106)

It is possible that the actors were being catered for in their already established roles so that Edmund could flow into

Mosca, Edgar into Bonario, Goneril and Regan into Voltore and Corvino, and Cordelia into Celia. Subtle shifts might be Gloucester into Corbaccio, the blind becoming the almost blind, and if doubling were practised into Sir Politic Would-be. The Fool in *King Lear* is rationalized into Nano, Castrone and Androgyno's burlesque on changeability and instability of being, while the Fool's Song in Act I of *Volpone* is Jonson's cool restatement of the pathos, wit and wisdom of Shakespeare's Fool and Edgar as Poor Tom. All shifts involved a modulation down from a major to a minor key, or from tragical irony to an irony on tragedy.

Lear's 'Who is it that can tell me who I am' is matched by Mosca's 'You still are what you were, sir'. These lines expressed in such a common style none the less separate the two plays utterly. The sense of mystery and openness to experience in Shakespeare sets itself off against the over-knowingness in Jonson. In Shakespeare it is the character, unknowing, opening himself out to the audience. In Jonson it is Voltore here, ignorant and being deceived by Mosca, who is being opened out to the audience for judgment. The perspectives are quite opposite.

A peripheral issue might seem to be Lady Politic Would-be. Yet she is given a language which is well in excess of her role. She has an impact on Volpone in his sick-bed comparable to that of the storm on Lear: 'the storm comes toward me', he cries, 'the dreadful tempest of her breath', 'Another flood of words! a very torrent'. Indeed, Lady Pol is a kind of lightning rod for Jonson's satire. There is much method for him in her madness. As when she exclaims:

There's nothing more doth overwhelm the judgment,
 And clouds the understanding, than too much
 Settling and fixing, and (as 'twere) subsiding
 Upon one object. For the incorporating
 Of these same outward things, into that part,
 Which we call mental, leaves some certain faeces
 That stop the organs, and, as Plato says,
 Assassinates our knowledge.

(III. iv. 105-12)

There is a certain likeness here to Lear's advice to Kent:

Thou thinkst 'tis much that this contentious storm
 Invades us to the skin; so 'tis to thee,
 But where the greater malady is fix'd,
 The lesser is scarce felt. Thou'dst shun a bear;
 But if thy flight lay toward the raging sea,
 Thou'dst meet the bear i' th' mouth. When the mind's free
 The body's delicate; this tempest in my mind
 Doth from my senses take all feeling else,
 Save what beats there —

(III. iv. 6-14)

Shakespeare's concentration intensifies Lear's suffering. Jonson in using a similar rhetoric seems to have something more on his mind than ridiculing Lady Pol. The means he uses are too strong for such a simple end. It may be that using the heroic idiom of Shakespeare he is having a sideways glance at contemporary English political affairs, reflecting covertly on the psychology of the State authorities — the paranoia, hysteria and mental fixations of the King and Privy Councillors — in the winter months following the Gunpowder Plot of 5 November 1605.

A final point in the comparison of Jonson and Shakespeare in regard to *Volpone* concerns the visitation scenes of Act I. It is too little remarked how these scenes are brilliant in a specific way, attaining a perfection of form for satirical comedy. They repeat the one pattern twice over. They are in effect the one character presented three times. Avarice, the old Morality Vice, is here differentiated into two, Avarice against Avarice, Volpone pitted against the legacy hunters. This breaking open of the allegorical and abstract character into two versions of himself is a brilliant dramatic device on Jonson's part, and deserves more recognition than the 'dog eats dog' formula which criticism usually accepts. But it is equally true that this duality or dualism in *Volpone* presents itself as a triad. Mosca's presence is necessary to orchestrate, diversify artistically, and interpret the representation of Avarice in Jonson's new and sophisticating way. Jonson had certain models for this in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. Yet it is the way he seized on the principle of

this complex interlocking process of three characters, and a triple set of incidents, and brought it to the forefront of his play that marks his genius as a comic dramatist.

What is more it marks a decisive shift beyond Shakespeare. In several of his plays Shakespeare had come to the threshold of seeing what the world would be like without any appeal to a transcendental order of values. Yet he resisted crossing this threshold to enact a world devoid of such values. He named the process a 'measure for measure' process, but stood back from allowing it to become a dominant way of assessing society. In *Measure for Measure* he has Duke Vincentio pronounce:

'An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!'
Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure;
Like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure.
(V. i. 407-9)

But the Duke is speaking from a position above the actual process itself; he is in command and in control. He will shortly act in a merciful way, and in that sense be a transcendental figure of authority at least in a social sense. Closer to a real embodiment of the 'measure for measure' process is the rueful comment of Claudio early in the play as he is being hauled off to gaol:

Our natures do pursue,
Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,
A thirsty evil; and when we drink we die.
(I. ii. 122-4)

The sense of judgment coming from our own natures and not from beyond, a melancholy sense of inescapable depravity in social behaviour is the threshold Shakespeare could look at but not cross. The famous lines of Albany in *King Lear* when he sees what Goneril, his wife, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund have made of Lear's world:

It will come
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep.
(IV. ii. 47-9)

It is a fearful vision which comes to be true for many of the characters in *King Lear*, but remains only part of the total fabric of ideas and values in Shakespeare's play.

What happens in *Volpone* is that this process is both conceptualized as a total vision of society and enacted in a way that is dynamic and artistic. The interlocking relations of the Jonsonian triads embody a philosophic stance appropriate to a new society, capitalist, entrepreneurial and materialistic. The vortex may have a dreadful finality to it, but its process is highly energizing. After Corbaccio makes his exit in Act I, Volpone turns to Mosca and says:

What a rare punishment
Is avarice to itself! (I. iv. 142-3)

Coolly and clinically, Jonson has crossed the threshold which Shakespeare as a conservative and a tragedian resisted. Society in *Volpone* is a self-regulating entity; appeals to transcendental realities are empty and vain. Comedy becomes the right medium for handling the dynamism of greed and avarice. Volpone is subject himself to the law he has enunciated for others. So too is Mosca for all that he adds 'Ay, with our help, sir'. The ultimate judgment in *Volpone* is when Volpone and Mosca turn on each other and destroy each other.