

Volpone and the Ends of Comedy

IAN DONALDSON

I

In Ben Jonson's late comedy *The Magnetic Lady* (1632) three characters sit on stage talking between the acts about the merits and shortcomings of the play they are currently watching. By the end of the fourth act the most censorious of these spectators, Master Damplay, feels that he knows well enough how the comedy is going to finish, and is ready to leave. 'Why, here his *Play* might have ended, if hee would ha' let it', says Damplay, 'and have spar'd us the vexation of a *fift Act* yet to come, which every one here knowes the issue of already, or may in part conjecture.' A boy who has been acting as Jonson's spokesman throughout these discussions suggests to Damplay that he wait awhile.

Stay, and see his last *Act*, his *Catastrophe*, how hee will perplexe that, or spring some fresh cheat, to entertaine the *Spectators*, with a convenient delight, till some unexpected, and new encounter breake out to rectifie all, and make good the *Conclusion*.

(Chorus after Act IV, 21-4, 27-31)¹

'Perplexed', 'cheat', 'unexpected': the terms aptly indicate Jonson's characteristic fondness for narrative complexity, secrecy, and surprise. The endings of Jonson's plays are seldom predictable, and Master Damplay is soon to discover that his guesses about the resolution of *The Magnetic Lady* are entirely mistaken. In their final acts, Jonson's plays grow denser, busier, more perplexing, as the action moves through unforeseen complications to a final, exhilarating, and unequally unforeseen conclusion.

Jonson attached particular importance to the endings of his comedies, as he did to the endings of his other writings. 'Our composition must be more accurate in the beginning and end,

1 All quotations from *Ben Jonson*, ed. C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1925-52); *i/j* and *u/v* spellings regularized.

then in the midst', he wrote in his commonplace book, *Discoveries*, translating a passage of Vives, 'and in the end more, then in the beginning; for through the midst the streame beares us' (ll. 1957-60). Jonson's audiences were at times less compelled by this principle than he was himself. 'Stay, and see his last Act ...': the Boy's words are addressed not simply to Damplay, but to the actual audience at Blackfriars watching this performance of *The Magnetic Lady* in 1632. For as Jonson had good cause to know, his audiences did not always stay to see his last act. *Sejanus*, with its masterly last act, was seemingly not heard to the end when staged in 1603. *Catiline* ran into similar trouble from a restive audience during its fourth act when it was performed in 1611. It is perhaps significant that in *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson's next play staged in 1614, a puppet play is broken up by the Puritan elder Zeal-of-the-Land Busy before it reaches its conclusion; as the comedy itself concludes, Bartholomew Cokes asks that the remainder of the puppet play be privately performed that evening in the sanctuary of Justice Overdo's house: 'bring the *Actors* along, wee'll ha' the rest o' the *Play* at home' (V.vi.114-15).

The performance in 1629 of *The New Inn*, with its highly elaborate fifth act, was as disastrous as that of the Roman tragedies. At the opening of this final act, the Host of the New Inn, alias Lord Frampul, fears that the various schemes which he has been contriving throughout the piece have all miscarried. 'I had thought', he says, '... like a noble Poet, to have had/My last act best: but all fails i' the plot' (V.i.24-7). Jonson here performs a deliberate feinting movement which is similar in its effect to that moment in *The Magnetic Lady* when Damplay is allowed to grumble about the predictability of that comedy's final act. Events are soon to accelerate in an extraordinary manner. Lord Beaufort reveals that he has just married a young woman named Laetitia. He is told that his new wife is in fact a boy, the Host's son, who has been dressed as a young woman as part of a friendly game. An ancient whiskey-tipping Irish nurse then reveals, to Lord Beaumont's relief, that this boy dressed as a girl is in fact a girl dressed as a boy dressed as a girl (whom the audience would naturally have recognized as a boy actor dressed as a girl dressed as a boy dressed as a girl); and that she is

furthermore the long-lost daughter of the Host himself, who has been mistaken all this time as to her sexual identity. The ancient nurse, pulling the black patch off her eye, then reveals that she herself is none other than Lady Frampul, the Host's own long-lost wife, who has been living undetected at the New Inn these past seven years. 'And all are contented', says Jonson in his summary of the play's action (*The Argument*, 126); but the audience most certainly was not. In his dedication to the text of the play published in 1631, Jonson refers in wounded tones to the way in which the piece was performed and received, and to the audience's temerity in 'rising between the Actes, in oblique lines'.² In his 'Ode to Himself' written after this debacle, Jonson bade an angry and final farewell to 'the lothed stage', to which he was in fact shortly to return with *The Magnetic Lady*. The critical discussions between Damplay, Probee, and the Boy in *The Magnetic Lady* are strategically placed by Jonson *between the acts*, at those most vulnerable of moments when an audience might rise, ominously, in oblique lines, and head for home. And it is before that busy fifth act that they are peremptorily told, in a speech ostensibly addressed to Damplay, to stay in their seats, for the best is yet to come.³

'This last Act is best of all', claims the dramatist Mr Bayes in the Duke of Buckingham's burlesque play, *The Rehearsal*, brandishing the manuscript of his new drama; but when the players, having worked through the first four acts in rehearsal, have read the argument of his fifth act, they decide they have

- 2 Cf. Jonson's reference in the Induction to *The Magnetic Lady* to 'the *Faeces*, or grounds of your people, that sit in the oblique caves and wedges of your house' (ll. 32-3). The word 'oblique' usually carries a negative charge in Jonson's writing: in *Sejanus* (III. 404) Cremutius Cordus is accused of libelling Tiberius 'By oblique glance of his licentious pen'. In Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ii. 787, the figure of Envy looks *obliquo*, askance; cf. Jonson, *The Underwood*, 73.2, *Ungathered Verse*, 2.7.
- 3 In 1637 Thomas Willford sternly judged Jonson's own life in much the same manner as the audiences who had condemned the final acts of his plays: 'Here Johnson lies, who spent his days, / In making sport, and comicke plays: / His life a Play, perform'd the worst, / The last Act did disgrace the first', etc.: *The Jonson Allusion Book*, ed. J.F. Bradley and J.Q. Adams (New Haven, 1922), pp.199-200. Willford's reference is to Jonson's abandonment of Catholicism in 1610.

seen and done quite enough already, and that it is now high time have read the argument of his fifth act, they decide that they haveto go off to dinner. Mr Bayes vows to take his revenge both upon the players and upon the town, 'for I'l Lampon 'em all. And since they will not admit of my Plays, they shall know what a Satyrist I am. And so farewell to this Stage, I gad, for ever.'⁴ Buckingham did not intend Mr Bayes as a humorous portrait of Ben Jonson, but had *The Rehearsal* been written in 1629 and not (as it was) in 1675, Mr Bayes might well have been seen as the disappointed author of *The New Inn*. In remembering Jonson's prodigious and unrivalled skills as a contriver of dramatic plot, it is salutary also to recall that those skills at times, to Jonson's own bewilderment and distress, appear to have outrun the capacities and tolerance of his audiences.

When Congreve at the end of the century encountered similar difficulties with audiences who failed to comprehend his superlatively plotted *The Way of the World*, he bade a definitive and comparatively philosophical farewell to the stage; at the age of twenty-nine, he chose to write no more for the public theatre. Jonson's attitude to his audiences was more combative, more adversarial, more deeply ambivalent than Congreve's; despite his repeated vows to leave the loathed stage, he always sooner or later returned. The moment just examined in *The Magnetic Lady* reveals a further contradiction in Jonson's creative mentality. He is here (as ever) remarkably explicit about his dramaturgical tactics, methods, and convictions; forthright and faintly hectoring in advising his audiences how best to respond to the felicities of his work. This forthrightness is of a piece with the moral openness that Jonson so often praises in his non-dramatic verse, and that characterizes his own presentations of himself as one who is direct and fully knowable, his motives and actions 'all so cleare, and led by reasons flame' (*Und.* xlvii. 69). Yet what Jonson is so openly declaring at this moment in *The Magnetic Lady* is paradoxically his love of mystery, of shifting his narrative in deceptive, fox-like ways. These apparently contradictory habits of revealing and concealing, or direction and indirection, may perhaps be seen as part of a single and consistent

4 George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, *The Rehearsal*, ed. Edward Arber, The English Reprints (London, 1868), V.i.

endeavour by Jonson to maintain authorial control over his audiences; hence (one might guess) his particular vexation when those audiences treated him with hostility or indifference. Anne Barton has recently attempted to characterize the 'Shakespearian' qualities of Jonson's late comedies, with their romancey accidents and encounters, unions and reunions, and has hailed *The New Inn* as Jonson's supreme achievement in this 'Shakespearian' mode.⁵ Yet Shakespeare – even the Shakespeare of *Cymbeline* – seldom cheats, manipulates, perplexes his audiences in Jonson's manner; seldom folds and unfolds his narrative with such cunning dexterity; seldom plots for victory. Shakespeare's comic endings, and Shakespeare's comic ends, are markedly different from those of Jonson.

In thinking about the nature of this difference, it may be helpful to recall the uneasiness which Samuel Johnson expressed on the matter of Shakespeare's dramatic endings, in the preface to his edition of the plays of Shakespeare in 1765.

When he found himself near the end of his work, and, in view of his reward, he shortened the labour to snatch the profit. He therefore remits his efforts where he should most vigorously exert them, and his catastrophe is improbably produced or imperfectly represented.⁶

More than once in his notes on the comedies, Dr Johnson remarks on the way in which Shakespeare, 'by hastening to the end of the play', chooses seemingly to forego an opportunity for explanation or moral reflection or perfect narrative resolution. 'By hastening to the end of the play', wrote Johnson in his commentary to *As You Like It*, 'Shakespeare suppressed the dialogue between the usurper and the hermit, and lost an opportunity of exhibiting a moral lesson in which he might have found matter worthy of his highest powers.'⁷ While it may not be easy to share Dr Johnson's conviction that the ending of *As You Like It* would have been improved by the insertion of a moral dialogue between Duke Frederick and 'the old religious man' he meets on the outskirts of the Forest of Arden, he has a

5 Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge, 1984), ch.12.

6 *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh (Oxford, 1925), p.21.

7 *Ibid.*, p.86.

general point here which is worth taking. There is indeed a wonderful casualness about the way in which *As You Like It*, like so many of Shakespeare's comedies, is finally wrapped up. We do not see the meeting of the hermit and the Duke, nor do we see the reconciliation of Orlando and his brother Oliver, nor do we even see Oliver's wooing and winning of Celia. These events are simply reported to us as having already occurred elsewhere, and now form part of the general fifth-act landslide towards happiness. Shakespeare does not attempt to explain these events any more than he attempts to display them.

Dr Johnson suspected that Shakespeare was sometimes overtaken during the final stages of his writing by laziness or impatience, as he often was himself. 'We never find ourselves so desirous to finish', he wrote in the last *Rambler* paper, 'or so impatient of delay, as when we know that delay cannot be long.'⁸ But the resolutions of Shakespeare's comedies need to be viewed in relation to his over-all style of plotting, which is generally more casual, more loosely-woven, more predictable than that of a dramatist such as Ben Jonson. Though we may not be able to foresee all the particular steps by which the (largely) happy endings of Shakespeare's comedies will be reached, we are normally given a broad sense of how events will turn out in the end. Lecturing in 1813 on 'The Characteristics of Shakespeare', Coleridge noted first and foremost that Shakespeare encourages 'Expectation in preference to surprize'.⁹ With his relatively open and lucid comic plots, Shakespeare can afford to take certain liberties towards the end, cutting across the corners once the final destination is in view.

Yet the differences between Shakespeare's and Ben Jonson's comic endings can be understood not only in relation to the two dramatists' general habits of plotting, but also in relation to the kinds of characters they create, and ultimately, perhaps, to the larger visions of the world which their comedies variously invoke. In this regard it is worth thinking a moment longer about Jonson's seemingly high valuation of moral openness and

8 *Essays from the 'Rambler', 'Adventurer' and 'Idler'*, ed. W.J. Bate (New Haven and London, 1968), p.228.

9 S.T. Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T.M. Raysor, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1960), i. 199.

simplicity. In lines written for the marriage of King James's favourite Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, and the divorced Countess of Essex, formerly Frances Howard, in December 1613, Jonson speaks of those who 'weare true wedding robes, and are true freindes/That bid, God give thee joy, and have no endes' (*Ungathered Verse*, 18. 5-6). 'No endes': no ulterior motives; nothing that lies behind or beyond that simple wish, 'God give thee joy'. The circumstances of the marriage were in fact complex and sinister: Carr's friend Sir Thomas Overbury, who opposed the marriage, had been sent to the Tower by Carr's own contrivance earlier in the year, and there poisoned, by the Countess's contrivance, a few months later. There were many tangled ends in this whole unpleasant affair, and while the true facts of the case were at this stage still far from clear, the motives of those who (like Jonson himself) appeared to rejoice over the union may not always have been entirely above suspicion.¹⁰ Jonson's bland benediction fleetingly recognizes this truth, which it attempts simultaneously to stabilize and simplify. Jonson deliberately chooses not to explore those very complexities which characteristically engaged his dramatic imagination. For to think of many of the characters from Jonson's dramas – of *Brainworm* and *Mosca* and *Face and Subtle*, of *Sejanus* and *Tiberius* and *Macro* and *Catiline*, of *Zeal-of-the-Land Busy* and *Sir Paul Eitherside* – is to think at once of the nature of duplicity, and the immense fascination which this held for Jonson. Such characters, like the artist who created them, are notable plotters. Their aims and motives are hidden. Their moral designs, like the narrative designs of Jonson himself, move deviously, mysteriously, unpredictably towards unknown ends. Deception is practised within Jonson's dramatic world on a scale and in a manner seldom if ever encountered in Shakespearian comedy, and the resolution of such deception, the untangling of diverse ends, is correspondingly more busily, more energetically, more dazzlingly contrived. The great plots of Jonsonian comedy serve as metaphors and models of the mental,

10 See Beatrice White, *Cast of Ravens* (London, 1965); David Lindley, 'Embarrassing Ben: The Masques for Frances Howard', in *Renaissance Historicism*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney and Dan S. Collins (Amherst, 1987), pp.248-64.

psychological, and moral state of the characters who inhabit them. This correspondence between narrative and human complexity is evident in Jonson's greatest comedy, *Volpone*.

II

In a house in Venice, a man of seemingly fabulous wealth seemingly lies dying. He is visited in turn by various seeming friends, each of whom bears in his hand a gift as token of his seeming love; each is eager to be his sole heir. The world which Jonson creates in *Volpone* is one in which few things are quite what they seem to be, and few people quite what they profess. To each of the clients in turn Mosca speaks of a different aim, a different end, which governs his actions: his true function, he protests, is to serve their ends. 'I would not doe that thing might crosse/Your ends, on whom I have my whole dependance, sir', he says to Corvino (II.vi.40-1). He tells Bonario that his father Corbaccio is planning to disinherit him, adding that he proffers such information not out of self-interest

but, as
I claime an interest in the generall state
Of goodnesse, and true vertue, which I heare
T'abound in you: and, for which mere respect,
Without a second ayme, sir, I have done it.
(III.ii.46-50)

He assures Voltore that he works wholly in his interests: 'My only ayme was, to dig you a fortune/Out of these two, old rotten sepulchers' (III.ix.38-9). 'You see, sir, how I worke/Unto your ends', he says confidingly to the lawyer later in the play (IV.vi.91-2); and, turning at once to Lady Would-be, 'My purpose is, to urge/My patron to reforme his will... you shall be now/Put in the first' (IV.vi.96-7, 99-100). Clients and tricksters alike speak solemnly of their purposes, aims, ends, and speculate constantly about the purposes, aims, ends of others. Voltore in the courtroom alleges that Corbaccio's 'settled purpose' was to disinherit his son, Bonario; that Bonario's 'purpose' in entering *Volpone*'s house was therefore to murder Corbaccio, and 'to stop/His fathers ends' (IV.v.64, 72, 88-9). Later Voltore will confess to the court that he himself gave false evidence to the court 'out of most covetous endes' (V.x.9). This is most

certainly true, but Voltore's 'ends' in making the confession are as devious and as covetous as they were before. And Sir Politic Would-be, ever one to copy Venetian fashions and reduce them to absurdity, declares: 'I should be loath to draw the subtile ayre/Of such a place, without my thousand aymes' (IV.i.66-7).

It is the conduct of Volpone and Mosca themselves, however, that raises most acutely the question of motive and intent. What are the two men, collectively and individually, really after? How far can each perceive the other's ends? Take, for example, this moment from the first act of the play, as Mosca and Volpone await the arrival of the clients. Voltore's knock is heard.

Volpone My caps, my caps, good MOSCA, fetch him in.

Mosca Stay, sir, your ointment for your eyes.

Volpone That's true;

Dispatch, dispatch: I long to have possession
Of my new present.

Mosca That, and thousands more,
I hope, to see you lord of.

Volpone Thankes, kind MOSCA.

Mosca And that, when I am lost in blended dust,
And hundred such, as I am, in succession –

Volpone Nay, that were too much, MOSCA.

Mosca You shall live,
Still, to delude these *harpyies*.

Volpone Loving MOSCA. ...
(I.ii.114-22)

Mosca and Volpone are acting here partly in collusion, sharing private jokes (picturing their victims as harpies) and a common excitement about the game they are about to play with Voltore. But Mosca's comically inflated language suggests that something rather more, or less, than shared play-acting is afoot: for Mosca is of course flattering Volpone in much the same manner in which he will flatter Voltore. He sees himself as no more than one of Volpone's many possessions, one in an unending line of sycophantic servants; a 'hundred such' will in turn succeed Mosca 'when I am lost in blended dust'. Volpone himself, in Mosca's superlative figure of flattery, will never die, but 'live,/Still, to delude these *harpyies*', as he evidently will delude death itself. Though Volpone is drawn to mild disclaimer ('Nay,

that were too much, MOSCA'), the prospect none the less delights him: 'Loving MOSCA'! Volpone is easily persuaded to imagine himself going on for ever; so deeply addictive are the games in which he is now engaged that he cannot imagine they will ever cease. Later in the play Volpone is to propose to Celia a seemingly endless round of sexual fantasy, masquerade, and indulgence. The psychological state which Jonson here explores is that of the gamester who, win or lose, cannot bring himself to stop. This state of mind is to be reflected, as I shall argue, in the formal structure of the comedy itself.

Absorbed in his sports, Volpone fails to observe that 'loving MOSCA' is not loving at all. Like others in the play, he cannot see what goes on under his nose. Corvino, watching his wife like a hawk, nevertheless contrives to lead her to the bed of the very man who wants to seduce her. Sir Politic Would-be, preaching to his companion Peregrine the supreme necessity of noting everything that goes on around one, sees plots and conspiracies in the most innocent of everyday transactions, yet fails to penetrate the real plots that are played out before his very eyes. Corbaccio, 'Old glazen-eyes' (V.iii.25), can, in a literal sense, barely see the world around him, but his fellow legacy-hunters are scarcely more perceptive than he. Gold, as Jonson had written some years earlier, 'strikes the quickest-sighted Judgement blinde' (*Ungathered Verse*, 3, *Riches*, I. 16). 'Too much light blinds 'hem, I thinke', says Mosca later in the play,

Each of 'hem
Is so possesst, and stuf with his owne hopes,
That any thing, unto the contrary,
Never so true, or never so apparent,
Never so palpable, they will resist it –

(V.ii.23-7)

Volpone perceives the general truth of this statement, but misses its possible application to himself. 'Loving MOSCA': even as Volpone utters these words, Mosca himself, in a perfectly-timed piece of theatrical business, is applying unguents to Volpone's eyes, to make it appear that Volpone's eyesight is failing: 'mine eyes are bad', Volpone is to murmur as Voltore approaches (I.iii.17). While we as spectators are allowed to see more clearly

than the characters within the play, it is essential to Jonson's narrative method, and to the nature of the world he projects, that we cannot see everything. Dryden described this method accurately.

If then the parts are managed so regularly that the beauty of the whole be kept entire, and that the variety become not a perplexed and confused mass of accidents, you will find it infinitely pleasing to be led in a labyrinth of design, where you see some of your way before you, yet discern not the end till you arrive at it.¹¹

The unknown 'end' here is at once narrative and motivational. Watching Jonson's plays, it may be difficult to perceive not merely how the plays will conclude, but why certain characters act in the way they do: the designs of both are partly hidden. The responses of the Avocatori to the complex fabrications of the conspirators in the *Scrutineo* later in *Volpone* are a heightened version of the bewilderment which the spectators of the play itself may feel as the complex plot twists this way and that: 'This same's a labyrinth!'; 'What maze is this!'; 'These be strange turnes!'; 'This is subtler, yet!' (V.x.42, V.xii.43, IV.v.59, V.xii.47).

III

In the second act we find *Volpone* playing a new part in what almost seems to be a new play. Disguised as the mountebank *Scoto* of Mantua – so well disguised that, as *Mosca* declares, 'SCOTO himselfe could hardly have distinguish'd!' (II.iv.36) – *Volpone* has established himself in a corner of the Piazza and already attracted a crowd which listens eagerly to his talk. Amongst those who wander up to listen are the English visitors *Sir Politic Would-be* and his new acquaintance *Peregrine*, who begin to speculate about the significance of the mountebank's performance. What are the man's real motives; what is the show designed ultimately to achieve? *Sir Politic*, with his genius for seeing duplicity everywhere is now – ironically – prepared to

11 'Of Dramatic Poesy: An Essay' (1668), in John Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1962), i.61.

take the seeming Scoto of Mantua at his own eloquent word, as a genuine and disinterested medical healer. Peregrine is less credulous and less entranced. They listen, each with his own convictions, to Volpone's patter.

Volpone And gentlemen, honorable gentlemen, know, that for this time, our banke, being thus remov'd from the clamours of the canaglia, shall be the scene of pleasure, and delight: For I have nothing to sell, little, or nothing to sell.

Sir Politic I told you, sir, his end.

Peregrine You did so, sir.

Volpone I protest, I, and my sixe servants, are not able to make of this precious liquor, so fast, as it is fetch'd away from my lodging, by gentlemen of your city; strangers of the terra-firma; worshipfull merchants; I, and senators too: who, ever since my arrivall, have detain'd me to their uses, by their splendidous liberalities. And worthily. For what availles your rich man to have his magazines stuf't with moscadelli, or of the purest grape, when his phisitions prescribe him (on paine of death) to drinke nothing but water, cocted with anise-seeds? O, health! health! the blessing of the rich! the riches of the poore! who can buy thee at too deare a rate, since there is no enjoying this world, without thee? Be not then so sparing of your purses, honorable gentlemen, as to abridge the naturall course of life –

Peregrine You see his end?

Sir Politic

I, is't not good?

(II.ii.69-89)

Volpone And gentlemen, honourable gentlemen, I will undertake (by vertue of chymicall art) out of the honourable hat, that covers your head, to extract the foure elements; that is to say, the fire, ayre, water, and earth, and returne you your felt without burne, or staine. For, whil'st others have been at the balloo, I have beene at my booke: and am now past the craggie pathes of studie, and come to the florie plaines of honour, and reputation.

Sir Politic I do assure you, sir, that is his ayme.

Volpone But, to our price.

Peregrine

And that withall, sir POL.

(II.ii.163-72)

What is this loquacious mountebank trying to achieve? What is

his spiel actually about; what is his aim, his end? ‘You see his end?’ asks Peregrine sceptically, implying that it is the crowd’s money that Scoto is really after; ‘I, is’t not good?’, remarks Sir Politic innocently, concentrating upon Scoto’s apparent concern for the physical well-being of the general public, and the general truth of the adage that health is worth more than riches. But neither Peregrine nor Sir Politic can really see Volpone’s ‘end’. The man we have watched in Act One handling diamonds and silver plate is not really interested in the small change of the Venetian riff-raff who have followed him into this obscure nook of the Piazza. For he is not really, as Peregrine suspects, a charlatan; he is instead a *charlatan charlatan*, a man playing the part of a man playing the part of an honest man, protesting as he does so that the crowd should beware of cheap imitations – for ‘*very many have assay’d, like apes in imitation of that, which is really and essentially in mee, to make of this oyle*’ (II.ii.149-50). Volpone is not out to make money this time, but rather to catch a glimpse of Corvino’s wife Celia; and it is for this ‘end’ that the elaborate charade has been set up in the street outside Corvino’s house.

Yet it is not clear that Volpone is in complete command of the situation. There is a suspicion that the entire show has been organized by Mosca for an ‘end’ of his own. This is the first time in the play that Volpone has been lured out of the safety of his own house and into the street; it is the first move in the ‘fox trap’ that will spring on Volpone in Act Five, leaving Mosca in possession of the keys, the house, and the goods of his master. Celia is in fact partly a creation of Mosca’s, conjured up at the end of Act One by the power of language. Mosca has been talking of the dreaded Lady Would-be, who ‘hath not yet the face, to be dishonest’; and casually adds:

But had she signior CORVINO’s wives face –
Volpone Has she shee so rare a face?
Mosca O, sir, the wonder,
 The blazing starre of *Italie!* a wench
 O’ the first yeere! a beautie, ripe, as harvest!
 Whose skin is whiter then a swan, all over!
 Then silver, snow, or lillies! a soft lip,
 Would tempt you to eternitie of kissing!

And flesh, that melteth, in the touch, to bloud!
Bright as your gold! and lovely, as your gold!

Volpone Why had not I knowne this, before?

Mosca Alas, sir.

My selfe, but yesterday, discover'd it.

Volpone How might I see her?

Mosca O, not possible;

Shee's kept as warily, as is your gold:

Never do's come abroad, never takes ayre,

But at a windore. All her lookes are sweet,

As the first grapes, or cherries: and are watch'd

As neere, as they are.

Volpone I must see her –

Mosca Sir.

There is a guard, of ten spies thicke, upon her;

All his whole household: each of which is set

Upon his fellow, and have all their charge,

When he goes out, when he comes in, examin'd.

Volpone I will goe see her, though but at her windore.

Mosca In some disguise, then.

Volpone That is true. I must

Maintayne mine owne shape, still, the same: we'll thinke.

(I.v.105-29)

Volpone falls in love with the description of Celia before he ever sees her. Mosca figures Celia's beauty as 'sweet/As the first grapes, or cherries', words that may recall Volpone's own description a little earlier in the play of his manner of luring his victims on,

still bearing them in hand,
Letting the cherry knock against their lips,
And, draw it, by their mouths, and back againe.

(I.i.88-90)

Celia is now such a cherry, knocking against Volpone's mouth; Mosca is now controlling, playing with his master – improvising, elaborating, tempting – just as his master has played with the legacy-hunters. Thus it is not merely for Volpone's sake but for a further 'end' of Mosca's own contriving that the scene outside Celia's house is being staged.

What is it about the mention of Celia that so excites Volpone?

It does not seem to be simply a matter of her physical desirability. What appears to arouse Volpone is (rather) the thought that Celia is so difficult of access; that he will need to exercise all his ingenuity, all his skills of deception and intrigue, to obtain her; it will be like cheating people of their money, but harder. He does not really want her (as they say) 'for herself', for he has no inkling of what her selfhood might consist in; nor could he be said to want her for, or with, himself, either. And what is the kind of selfe that Volpone might offer her? How is the shifting, multiple character of Volpone to be described? 'Live to that point I will, for which I am man,/And dwell as in my Center, as I can', wrote Jonson once of himself (*The Underwood*, 47.59-60). Neither Volpone nor Mosca could be said to have a 'point', a 'Center' of selfhood: a stable, coherent, and continuing identity such as Jonson himself evidently wished to achieve within his own moral life. When we meet Mosca alone, he reveals almost no sense of his own selfhood, but rather a delight in his ability to escape from self. He is

your fine, elegant rascall, that can rise,
 And stoope (almost together) like an arrow;
 Shoot through the aire, as nimbly as a starre;
 Turne 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, then a thought!

(III.i.23-29)

What is actually behind the visor is merely a face smiling at its own swiftness in changing visors. Who *is* that brilliantly animated figure performing outside Celia's window, by whom Volpone hopes that Celia will be captivated: a man so skilfully disguised that 'SCOTO himselfe could hardly have distinguish'd' (II.iv.36), yet also maintaining his 'owne shape, still, the same' (I.v.129)? Corvino may speak more truly than he knows when he suggests that such a man consists entirely in his externalities, his clothing and appurtenances.

were you' enamour'd on his copper rings?
 His saffron jewell, with the toade-stone in't?
 Or his imbroidred sute, with the cope-stitch,

Made of a herse-cloth? or his old tilt-feather?
Or his starch'd beard?

(II.v.11-15)

Like Mosca, Volpone plays Houdini in a world of fixed identities; while others sink in the weights and manacles of their own selfhood, he constantly liberates himself from himself, testing new sleights, new manoeuvres, new identities. When in the third act of the play Volpone finally contrives to have Celia led to his bedroom and left alone with him, he tells her nothing about himself other than that he delights in escaping from self. He claims no constancy and singleness of purpose, but describes instead his reputation as an actor and the 'severall shapes' and 'varying figures' he has adopted for her sake (III.vii.148, 152). What he offers to Celia is the promise of incessant, vertiginous change, of continual self-projection into feigned and alien identity. When they 'have quite run through/And weary'd all the fables of the gods',

Then will I have thee in more moderne formes,
Attired like some sprightly dame of *France*,
Brave *Tuscan* lady, or proud *Spanish* beauty;
Sometimes, unto the *Persian Sophies* wife;
Or the grand-*Signiors* mistresse; and, for change,
To one of our most art-full courtizans,
Or some quick *Negro*, or cold *Russian*;
And I will meet thee, in as many shapes:
Where we may, so, trans-fuse our wandring soules,
Out at our lippes, and score up summes of pleasures,

*That the curious shall not know,
How to tell them, as they flow;
And the envious, when they find
What their number is, be pind.*

(III.vii.226-39)

The number of the lovers' pleasures, like the number of their guises, is seen by Volpone as infinite; despite the Catullan note of warning in his earlier song ('*Time will not be ours, for ever*'), he sees no end to this mode of dalliance and courtship, just as he has seen no end to his acquisition of riches.

Yet, I glory

More in the cunning purchase of my wealth,
Then in the glad possession

Volpone has said earlier in the play (I.i.30-2), and the glad possession of Celia likewise seems to be (oddly enough) of secondary interest to him once he has her in the bedroom. So preoccupied is Volpone by reverie, fantasy, and song, by his imagining of other, hypothetical encounters with Celia tricked out as other women, that the present opportunity for a real encounter with her somehow eludes him. For this reason, the long scene between them in the third act is in a way curiously unthreatening. Volpone is more entranced with the prospect of his own infinite and protean cunning than he is with Celia herself, and the scene is to be terminated only by Volpone's sudden realization of the absurdity of his proceeding ('I should have done the act, and then have parlee'd') and the blundering entrance of Bonario ('Forbear, foule ravisher, libidinous swine', etc., III.vii.165, 267).

'You see his end?' Such a seemingly simple question does not permit of an easy answer. For Volpone is not just intent upon amassing wealth, or luring Celia into his bed, or achieving any other clearly-definable goal of this kind. He is a man with ulterior motives, certainly, yet that conventional phrase does not fully describe him, for there seems in a dizzying way to be something always ulterior to those ulterior motives. It is in fact *the process*, not *the end*, that fascinates him: the infinite and exhilarating play of possibility. Jonson a few years later was to explore a similar characteristic in the person of Catiline, whose insatiable ambition knows no limits, no place to stop:

That restlesse ill, that still doth build
Upon successe; and ends not in aspiring:
But there begins. And ne'er is fill'd,
While ought remains that seemes but worth desiring ...
(Chorus after Act III, 864-7)

IV

Let me now return to the critic Damplay, sitting on stage commenting querulously upon the action of *The Magnetic Lady*. A moment before Damplay's announcement that the resolution of

the comedy is so obvious that the audience might as well go home, he has confessed himself beaten by the complexity of the plot. The play, he remarks, is 'almost pucker'd, and pull'd into that knot, by your Poet, which I cannot easily, with all the strength of my imagination, untie.' 'Like enough', responds the boy, 'nor is it in your office to be troubled or perplexed with it, but to sit still, and expect. The more your imagination busies it selfe, the more it is intangled, especially if ... you happen on the wrong end' (Chorus after Act IV, 2-9). '*The wrong end*': what the boy means by this phrase is clear from one of his remarks earlier in the piece. 'A good *Play*', he observes, 'is like a skeene of silke: which, if you take by the right end, you may wind off, at pleasure, on the bottome, or card of your discourse, in a tale or so; how you will: But if you light on the wrong end, you will pull all into a knot, or elfe-locke; which nothing but the sheers, or a candle will undoe, or separate' (Induction, 136-41). Knotting and plotting characteristically come together in Jonson's imagination. Early in *Volpone*, Mosca tells the advocate Voltore that his master admires the ability of lawyers to 'make knots, and undoe them' (I.iii.57); and many of the complications of the play's subsequent action are due indeed to the skilful ravellings and unravellings of *Volpone*, Mosca, and the lawyer Voltore. 'The knot is now undone, by miracle!', exclaims the first Avocatore at the play's final fifth act *denouement*. But Jonson's phrase '*The wrong end*' has another sense, too: it describes the dramatic resolution that we – like Damplay in *The Magnetic Lady* – mistakenly think is about to happen. *Volpone* has several moments of this kind, when the action of the play seems about to conclude, and then unexpectedly moves off in another direction. Dryden, in praising Jonson's supreme skill in dramatic plotting, was uneasy about this aspect of *Volpone*. The plots of *The Alchemist* and *The Silent Woman* seemed to Dryden to be superlatively contrived; yet he found the plot of *Volpone* not quite perfect: 'for there appear to be two actions in the Play; the first naturally ending with the fourth Act; the second forc'd from it in the fifth'. Just when the comedy seems to reach its natural conclusion, the action starts up all over again.

Questions of formal structure in Jonson's drama, I have suggested, cannot easily be separated from questions of character

and motive; and in thinking about Dryden's objection to the plot of *Volpone* it may be helpful to think further about the psychology of its principal plotters. At the end of the fourth act of the play, in a bold defence to the charge of attempted rape, Volpone has been carried into the Venetian courtroom in the guise of a man at the very point of death, too frail and impotent to have even threatened the act of which he stands accused. Mosca has daringly invited the court to apply their instruments of torture to this dying man to see if his frailty is a sham. The move is brilliantly successful: the Avocatori are fooled, the charges against Volpone are dismissed, the innocent Bonario and Celia are brought under condemnation, and Volpone's fraudulent status as a dying man is formally legitimated. Stephen Greenblatt has described this turn of events as constituting the 'false ending' of *Volpone*, and suggested that Jonson is here employing a structural device that can be paralleled in other plays of the period.¹² At the beginning of the fifth act we find Volpone at home, relieved yet deeply shaken by his latest victory in the Scrutineo; confronting, as Greenblatt suggestively observes, a kind of existential void, a moment at which he has no more roles to assume, when his very sense of selfhood is thus paradoxically threatened; for what Volpone *is* seemingly depends upon the games he plays.

Well, I am here; and all this brunt is past.
 I ne'er was in dislike with my disguise,
 Till this fled moment; here, 'twas good, in private,
 But in your publike, *Cave*, whilst I breathe.

(V.i.1-4)

'Breathe', from exertion and from lack of exertion; make a pause, and quicken into life again: for Volpone has been playing the part of a man who is almost at his last breath. And the play itself momentarily breathes, pauses, for this seems the furthest reach of Volpone's and Mosca's audacity.

Mosca. We must, here, be fixt;
 Here, we must rest; this is our master-peece:
 We cannot thinke, to goe beyond this.

(V.ii.12-14)

12 Stephen Greenblatt, 'The False Ending in *Volpone*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 75 (1976), 90-104.

Yet neither Volpone nor Mosca can 'rest' or 'be fixt' even at their most triumphant moments. Like the children in Cocteau's *Les enfants terribles* daring each other to perform ever more hazardous and more public thefts, Mosca and Volpone urge each other to take one more step, defy each other not to enjoy the risks they are deliberately running. 'You are not taken with it, enough, me thinkes?' Mosca remarks, catching the weariness in Volpone's voice as they discuss their latest coup; and Volpone attempts to rally:

O, more, then if I had enjoy'd the wench:
 The pleasure of all woman-kind's not like it.
 (V.ii.10-11)

'It' – an 'it' which lies at the very heart of the play – is the pleasurable art of deception, an art which for Volpone and Mosca is more thrilling than sex itself. This 'it', we might say, is the ultimate end for which Volpone plays.

I have so far proposed a psychological explanation for the structural feature of *Volpone* which troubled Dryden, but such an explanation has its own limits. For as the fifth act of the play proceeds, we may feel that there is a further sense in which Dryden's general but uneasy feeling about the last stages of the play might be justified. For *Volpone* does in fact present two different kinds of ending, which differ markedly in tone and temper.

The first ending of *Volpone* is one which turns upon poetic, rather than civil, justice, involving a moment of sudden clarification, in which a character suddenly perceives the nature of his or her own folly. For Volpone himself, the moment of clarification comes in Act V Scene xi, when he meets Nano, Androgyno, and Castrone wandering through the streets of Venice, and realizes that Mosca has double-crossed him. He should have stayed at home. He has ventured from the safety of the private place to the peril of the public place, and has been caught overreaching, going beyond and out of himself. In Act V Scene iii a similar realization comes to each of the legacy-hunters in turn. They have overreached themselves; and Mosca advises each of them in turn to 'go home'. To Lady Would-be he says, 'Goe home, and use the poore Sir Pol, your knight, well'

(V.iii.44). To Corvino: 'Go home, be melancholique, too, or mad' (V.iii.60). To Corbaccio: 'Go home, and die, and stinke' (V.iii.76). And to Voltore: 'Good faith, you looke/As you were costive; best go home, and purge, sir' (V.iii.100-01). In the following scene, a similar moral is forcibly conveyed to the great traveller, Sir Politic Would-be. He must keep within himself, know his limits, reduce his thousand aims to one. Tormented by the disguised Peregrine, he promises to 'shrinke my poore head, in my politique shell', 'Creeping, with house, on backe' (V.iv.89, 88). The tortoise – into whose shell Sir Politic retreats – was known as a creature which remained permanently 'at home'; as an emblem of integrity, polity, and self-conservation.¹³ At the end of the play, the Avocatori send the innocent Celia 'Home, to her father with her dowrie trebled' (V.xii.144); Celia, who has been so obsessively shut away by her husband Corvino in that other house in 'an obscure nook of the Piazza' until the one catastrophic enforced venture to an apparently safe, apparently private house elsewhere, which has led to public exposure and humiliation.

'Home' (like 'Center') is an important word for Jonson.¹⁴ In *The Forest*, Jonson writes of the value of the firm and enduring life that Sir Robert Sidney (Lord Lisle) and Sir Robert Wroth have established on their country estates, dwelling 'at home', self-sufficient and self-sustaining (*The Forest*, 2.102; 3.13). The lady who is the subject and speaker in *The Forest*, 4, 'To the World', vows to 'make my strengths, such as they are,/Here in my bosome, and at home' (ll. 67-8). A similar moral is suggested in the first ending of *Volpone*: of the need to live quietly within the compass of one's own strengths, rather than quest endlessly after other identities and other ambitions. Though the primary energies of the comedy may seem to derive from characters who delight in mobility and multiplicity of being,

13 Ian Donaldson, 'Jonson's Tortoise', *The Review of English Studies*, XXIX (1968), 162-6; John Creaser, 'The Popularity of Jonson's Tortoise', *The Review of English Studies*, XXVII (1976), 38-46.

14 Thomas M. Greene, 'Ben Jonson and the Centered Self', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 10 (1970), 325-48; Ian Donaldson, 'Jonson's Magic Houses', *Essays and Studies 1986*, collected by G.A. Wilkes, pp.39-61.

Jonson hints finally at the need for moral stability and singleness of purpose.

Yet the comedy does not end there, as it might have done, but in an altogether more severe manner. The Avocatori, formally reconvened in the courtroom, administer harsh penalties to the tricksters and to their collaborating victims. Mosca is to be whipped and to remain 'perpetual prisoner in our gallies' (V.xii.114); Volpone's wealth is to be sent to 'the hospitall, of the *Incurabili*', while Volpone himself is 'to lie in prison, cramp't with irons,/ Till thou bee'st sicke, and lame indeed' (V.xii.120, 123-4). It is as though Jonson felt that *Volpone* the play could not end until Volpone the man, with his restless, ceaseless energies, was literally chained to the floor; 'fixt'. And by this strange last movement to the piece, as Dryden remarked, 'the poet gained the end he aimed at, the punishment of vice, and the reward of virtue'.¹⁵ In his Epistle addressed to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge prefixed to the 1607 quarto edition of *Volpone*, Jonson himself spoke of this, his ultimate 'end' or 'ayme' in writing the comedy; a moral 'end' that was for him finally more important than the formal 'end' conventionally associated with comedy. 'Doctrine', he declared, 'is the principall end of *poesie*, to informe men, in the best reason of living'.

And though my *catastrophe* may, in the strict rigour of *comick* law, meet with censure, as turning back to my promise; I desire the learned and charitable critick to have so much faith in me, to think it was done off industrie: For, with what ease I could have varied it, neerer his scale (but that I feare to boast my owne faculty) I could here insert. But my special ayme being to put the snaffle in their mouths, that crie out, we never punish vice in our *enterludes*, &c. I tooke the more liberty ...
(108-17)

It is worth observing the way in which Jonson's explanation of his final comic end in writing *Volpone* is itself *fixed* in the full authority and stability of the printed text, in an epistle formally addressed to 'the learned and charitable critick' at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and placed strategically at the very

¹⁵ Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Essays*, ed. Watson, i.61.

beginning of the 1607 quarto. In the theatre, the restive or ignorant playgoer might, like Damplay, seize on 'the wrong end' of the comedy, failing to perceive its true narrative or moral design; even failing, perhaps, to stay in his seat for the final act.

There may seem to be (as some readers have felt) something excessive about the conclusion of *Volpone*, almost as though Jonson were turning punitively against an impulse in his own creative nature, attempting forcibly to resolve some final, wavering irresolution in his own attitude towards the play's two major characters.¹⁶ Certainly the conclusion of the play defies prediction, as it defies convention. For *Volpone* does not end as comedies traditionally do. There are no reconciliations achieved, no fortunes won, no marriages and no betrothals, no feasts, no dances, no reunions, no lovers' meetings. For all the major characters the play ends in frustration, in humiliation, in punishment, or in separation. Celia is formally parted from her husband Corvino, and she and Bonario also (as Coleridge regretted)¹⁷ go their separate ways. Disjunction, not joining in marriage, is the conclusion of this comedy. Yet it is in this very bleakness, this extraordinary defiance of comedic expectation, that the final power and singularity of the play reside. Yeats recognized that power and singularity when he saw the play in performance in 1921, and wrote to the producer, Allan Wade:

Volpone was even finer than I expected. I could think of nothing else for hours after I left the theatre. The great surprise to me was the pathos of the two young people, united not in love but in innocence, and going in the end their separate way. The pathos was so much greater because their suffering was an accident, neither sought nor noticed by the impersonal greed that caused it.¹⁸

Shortly before his death Yeats discussed Jonson's play again. Attempting to explain his antipathy to a modern play which

16 See especially S.L. Goldberg, 'Folly into Crime: The Catastrophe of *Volpone*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, XX (1959), 233-42.

17 Coleridge, *Literary Remains*, 1836, quoted in *Jonson, 'Volpone': A Casebook*, ed. Jonas A. Barish (London and Basingstoke, 1972), p.51.

18 *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954), p.665.

'displayed a series of base actions without anything to show that its author disapproved or expected us to do so', Yeats turned by way of contrast to *Volpone*, arguing this time that the ending of the play carried not only an affective but a moral force.

The wicked should be punished, the innocent rewarded, marriage bells sound for no evil man, unless an author calls his characters before a more private tribunal and has so much intellect and culture that we respect it as though it were our own. In Jonson's 'Volpone', one of the greatest satiric comedies, Volpone goes to his doom but innocence is not rewarded, the young people who have gone through so much suffering together leave in the end for their father's houses with no hint of marriage, and this excites us because it makes us share in Jonson's cold implacability. His tribunal is private, that of Shakespeare public.¹⁹

'Public' in the sense that Shakespeare was prepared happily to write 'as we like it', to comply with the larger generic expectations and conventions of the popular theatre and its audiences. Jonson went his own way, following his own more personal and more sombre notions of dramatic propriety, judging his own plays first and allowing others to judge, if they wished, after him. As he wrote defiantly and delightedly of another, earlier piece: '*By (...), 'tis good, and if you lik't, you may*' (*Cynthia's Revels*, Epilogue, 20).

19 W.B. Yeats, *On the Boiler* (Dublin, [1939]), pp.32-3.