

Lecture 20: *Volpone*

RADIX MALORUM EST CUPIDITAS

Not money but the DESIRE for it, or anything.
What we call GREED.

In other words, Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, like those love sonnets we read a couple of weeks ago, and like the devotional poetry we read last week, is all about DESIRE.

DESIRE for Gold, or what Gold May purchase, or . . .
WHAT?

Volpone's first speech: 1.1.1-27 (B1337)

Good morning to the Day; and, next, my Gold:
Open the shrine, that I may see my Saint.
Hayle the worlds soule, and mine. More glad then is
The teeming earth, to see the longd-for Sunne
Peepe through the hornes of the Cælestiall Ram,
Am I, to view thy splendor, darkening his:
That lying here, amongst my other hoordes,
Shew'st like a flame, by night; or like the Day
Strooke out of Chaos, when all darkenes fled
Unto the center.

O thou Son of Sol,
(But brighter then thy father) let me kisse,
With adoration, thee, and euery relique
Of sacred treasure, in this blessed roome.
Well did wise Poets, by thy glorious name,
Title that age, which they would have the best;
Thou being the best of things: and far transcending
All stile of ioy, in children, parents, friends,
Or any other waking dreame on earth.
Thy lookes when they to Venus did ascribe,
They should have given her twenty thousand Cupids;
Such are thy beauties, and our loves. Deare Saint,
Riches, the dombe God, that giu'st all men tongues;
That canst do naught, and yet mak'st men do all things;
The price of soules; euen hell, with thee to boote,
Is made worth heauen. Thou art vertue, fame,
Honor, and all things else. Who can get thee
He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise, —

Mosca And what he will Sir. Riches are in fortune
A greater good, then wisdom is in nature.

Volpone True, my beloved Mosca. Yet, I glory
More in the cunning purchasse of my wealth,
Then in the glad possession; since I gaine
No cowmon way: I vse no trade, no venter;
I wound no earth with plow-shares; fat no beasts
To feede the Shambles; have no mills for iron,
Oyle, corne, or men, to grinde them into poulder;
I blow no subtill glasse; expose no shipps
To threatnings of the furrow-faced sea;
I turne no moneys, in the publike banke;
Nor vsure priuate.

The plot of *Volpone* is the weaving and unweaving, of the complex motives that inform this speech: *Desire overreaches and finally consumes itself*.

The fable ends with the First Avocatore assigning various “poetically just” punishments to the criminals.

What are the rewards & punishments?

Mosca is sentenced to slavery in the Galleys. Volpone, being a gentleman, cannot “fall / Under like censure” (5.12.117-18). So his fortune is confiscated and given to the Hospital for the *Incurabili*, where patients terminally ill from syphilis were cared for,

Like Sidney, Jonson believed, or professed to believe, that poetry was morally efficacious, that the study of poetry “offers to mankind a certain rule and pattern of living well and happily, disposing us to all civil offices of society.” [1

But the editor of your Anthology has discerned a paradox at the heart of Jonson’s dramaturgy: “Like Shakespeare, Donne, and Thomas More before him, Jonson was disturbed by the rise of a protocapitalist economic order that seemed to emphasize competition and the acquisition of material goods over reciprocal good-will and mutual obligation. On the other hand, Jonson was also fascinated by the entrepreneurial potential liberated by the new economic order. His protagonists, Volpone and Mosca, may be morally bankrupt, but they are also the most intelligent, adaptable characters in the play” (B 1334).

And how do you feel about the virtuous characters, Bonario (Good Guy) and Celia (Heavenly)?

The editor continues: “although Jonson was a strong advocate for the educational and morally improving potential of the theater—his theater in particular—the talents of his main characters are essentially those of theatrical performance and improvisation. In fact, as Jonson was well aware, he was himself deeply implicated in what he satirized. The lowborn, unscrupulous,

brilliantly inventive Mosca, a flattering aristocratic hanger-on who aspires to high status himself, at times seems to be the author's evil twin."

In other words, *Volpone* is about the self-disciplining of desire. Mosca himself tells us why he over-reaches: **because he can**, and because his imagination is so fertile that its exercise, rather than its practical benefit to him, is the prime motive for his deceptions. He forgets who he is:

I Feare, I shall begin to grow in love
With my deare selfe, and my most prosp'rous parts,
They do so spring, and burgeon; I can feele
A whimsey in my bloud: (I know not how)
Successe hath made me wanton. (3.1.1-5)

Like his master, more enjoying the pursuit than the possession of his wealth, Mosca practices illusion for its own sake. Therein lies the joy of creation, bringing forth "forms such as never were in nature" (Sidney, *Defense* B957), becoming all things and becoming like God. And therein lies the mortal danger of self-love, that sees the self as the measure of all thing. *Volpone* is, among so many other things, a study in the sociopathology of Narcissism.

NOTES

1] From *Timber, or Discoveries*, in *Ben Jonson: Selected Works*, ed. David McPherson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 405.