Volpone

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BEN JONSON

Ben Jonson's life started out dramatic and difficult. When Jonson was born in 1572, his father, a clergyman from London, had already died. As a youth, Jonson studied at the Westminster School under William Camden, where he grew to love classical learning. After leaving the Westminster School he was forced to become a bricklayer, which he left in favor of joining the army. Back in London after his service, his early career as a dramatist was chaotic: he went to jail for writing a controversial play, and after his release, he killed another actor in a duel. Jonson was a controversial figure, and he heavily satirized English society while slowly climbing the social ranks. Though he continued to have qualms with English authority, he gained prominence in court by writing masques and successful plays, until he was given a yearly pension from King James I, establishing him as England's unofficial Poet Laureate. Jonson was friends with William Shakespeare, and it's Jonson who famously wrote that Shakespeare was "for all time." Towards the end of his life, Jonson served as a mentor to a group of younger poets (such as Thomas Carew and Robert Herrick) called the "Sons of Ben." Jonson continued writing until his death in 1637.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Volpone was written and performed in 1606, three years after King James I assumed the throne, and only one year after Jonson was imprisoned for suspicion of involvement with the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 (an attempt to assassinate King James). Jonson wrote at a time when a new capitalist-oriented order seemed to be developing, in which the English viewed Italy (and Venice, in particular) as money-obsessed and morally corrupted. At this point in his career, Jonson was in fierce competition with his contemporaries, and he uses the play's Prologue to make fun of playwrights Thomas Dekker and John Marston.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ben Jonson used many sources in writing *Volpone*. The characters' animal names and some of the themes are taken from medieval beast fables about a fox named Reynard, as well as a story in Aesop's *Fables* in which a fox plays dead to trick a crow into dropping cheese. The notion of an old rich man toying with greedy people who are hoping to inherit his money comes from Lucian, an ancient Greek rhetorician and satirist, and many of the characters (like a dishonest lawyer) are based on classic tropes in Roman comedy. Jonson also draws on the Italian commedia dell'arte, which was a form of comedic drama in Italy in which performers wore masks. Like in commedia dell'arte, masks are often used in productions of *Volpone* to emphasize the animal nature of the play's characters. *Volpone* has been performed and adapted numerous times, including with a changed ending in which Mosca receives all of Volpone's wealth.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Volpone, or The Fox
- **When Written:** 1606
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1607 (Quarto), then 1616 in *Works*
- **Literary Period:** English Renaissance (Jacobean)
- **Genre:** Comedy
- **Setting:** Venice, Italy
- **Climax:** Volpone's ruse is revealed in court.
- **Antagonist:** Volpone, Mosca

EXTRA CREDIT

"Works." *Volpone* was first published in 1607 in a quarto (essentially a small pamphlet), but modern texts are primarily based on the version that Jonson published in his 1616 book titled *Works*. It might seem standard today for plays to be published as literature, but in Jonson's day it was extremely controversial. Shakespeare, for example, published none of his plays during his lifetime. With *Works*, Jonson tried to claim a literary status above his contemporaries by establishing himself as a professional writer. This helped give his plays their literary status.

Neck Verse. Jonson might have been executed as a young man if not for the legal loophole called the Benefit of Clergy, which allowed defendants to be tried in religious instead of secular court, since a religious court was much less likely to give a death sentence. After Jonson killed another actor in a duel, he pled guilty but was able to use the Benefit of the Clergy. The only requirement to receive this benefit was the recitation of a Bible verse in Latin. This verse, Psalm 51, is known as the neck verse, since by saying it in secular court, one could avoid hanging and be tried again in a religious court.

PLOT SUMMARY

Volpone is an old, wealthy man without children living in Venice, Italy. With Mosca, his parasite (which means a hanger-on, a

low-born servant or follower living off a wealthier person), Volpone stages an elaborate scam. Volpone pretends to be deathly ill, and is leading several people on to believe that they will be named his heir. Chief among them are Voltore, a lawyer; Corbaccio, an even older, sicker man; and Corvino, a merchant. Mosca convinces each man that he is the front runner to be named heir, and each one showers Volpone with gifts and **gold** hoping to remain on his good side. After fooling each man, and even getting Corbaccio to disinherit his son, Volpone learns that Corvino has a beautiful wife (named Celia), and he decides to try to woo her.

Outside of Corvino's home elsewhere in Venice, the English knight Sir Politic Would-be meets a fellow English traveler named Peregrine. Sir Politic is extremely gullible about news from home, and Peregrine asks him for travel advice because he thinks Sir Politic is so amusing.

Disguised as assistants to a mountebank (an Italian swindler), Mosca and Nano, Volpone's dwarf, enter the square where Sir Politic and Peregrine have been talking. They are followed by a large crowd and by Volpone, who is dressed as a famous mountebank. In disguise, Volpone makes an elaborate sales pitch for a cure-all elixir. As planned, he attracts the attention of Celia, whose window is nearby. She throws down a handkerchief, but Corvino chases off the crowd and the mountebank before Volpone has a chance to speak with Celia.

Corvino is extremely controlling of Celia, and he makes violent threats to her for interacting with the mountebank. He plans to restrict her even more by forcing her to wear a chastity belt and forbidding her from even going near windows. Soon after making these threats, Mosca shows up at Corvino's house, and he says that doctors have decided that the only cure for Volpone is to sleep with a young woman. By pitting him against Voltore and Corbaccio, Mosca is able to convince Corvino to offer Celia up to Volpone in exchange for being named heir.

While praising himself for his skills, Mosca meets Bonario, the son Corbaccio agreed to disinherit earlier in the play. Mosca brings Bonario to Volpone's house and places him in a hiding spot so that he can witness his father disinheriting him, thereby creating more chaos and frustration for Volpone's victims. While Mosca is still gone, the extremely chatty Lady Would-be, Sir Politic's wife, visits Volpone. Mosca arrives and gets rid of Lady Would-be by saying that he saw her husband with a prostitute. Mosca then hides Bonario to witness the staged will signing.

However, instead of Corbaccio arriving to disinherit Bonario, Corvino shows up early with Celia. When Corvino reveals to Celia why they are there, Celia resists, and after Corvino is unable to convince her to sleep with Volpone, who is still pretending to be **diseased**, Corvino leaves her alone with Volpone to see if she'll be more willing in private. Volpone springs out of bed and tries to woo her. When that fails, he tries to rape her, but Bonario has been eavesdropping, and he jumps out to save her.

Mosca and Volpone prepare an elaborate lie to get out of trouble. Meanwhile, at the piazza, Sir Politc and Peregrine have an absurd discussion about potential business plans. They are interrupted, however, when Lady Would-be shows up, thinking that Peregrine is the prostitute Mosca saw with Sir Politic. She screams at Sir Politic and accuses Peregrine of being a whore dressed as a man, but Mosca soon arrives and says that the prostitute he saw is now in court before the Venetian senate. Peregrine believes that Sir Politic intentionally set him up to embarrass him. Later, in retaliation, Peregrine embarrasses Sir Politic by pretending that Sir Politic is wanted by the Venetian authorities.

In court, Voltore, Corvino, Corbaccio, and Mosca present a calculated lie framing Bonario and Celia. They say that Bonario wounded Mosca, tried to kill Corbaccio, and wants to defame Volpone by having Celia make a false rape accusation. All the while, Mosca continues to convince Voltore, Corvino, and Corbaccio that he is working for each of them exclusively. Volpone is forced to appear in court, and he convincingly acts diseased.

Though Mosca's plan worked and Volpone is freed, Volpone is not satisfied. He decides to fake his death to further torture Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino. Volpone tells Mosca to tell the men that Mosca himself is the heir, and while hiding, Volpone watches Mosca infuriate Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, and Lady Would-be as they all find out that none of them have inherited the fortune. Volpone then disguises himself as an officer to further taunt everyone, but he pushes Voltore so far that Voltore decides to confess to the lie about Celia and Bonario that he told in court to claim Volpone's innocence. Volpone is able to salvage the situation by claiming that Voltore was possessed when giving his confession, but then Mosca arrives in court.

Mosca, who has decided to swindle Volpone, has realized that, since Volpone is presumed dead with Mosca as his heir, Mosca can inherit the fortune by continuing to act like Volpone is dead. He uses this plan to secretly bargain for some of Volpone's fortune in court, but the two cannot reach a deal. To prevent Mosca from getting away with all of his money, Volpone reveals himself and his entire plan. The Venetian court sentences Mosca to life in prison, they disbar and banish Voltore, they confine Corbaccio to a monastery and give all his money to Bonario, they publicly humiliate and legally divorce Corvino, and they provide the upper-class equivalent of a death sentence to Volpone.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Volpone – Volpone is the play's central figure. He is an old, rich,

childless Italian gentleman with no heir his fortune, and he values wealth above all else. His name means sly fox, which is a perfect allegory for his character, since he spends the entire play joyfully deceiving Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino into believing that each one will be the sole heir to his fortune, all the while becoming wealthier through them. He is extremely greedy, and he takes immense pleasure in fooling the other Italian men. While Volpone's pursuits begin as comedic and light-hearted, they eventually progress to the extreme when Volpone attempts to rape Corvino's wife, Celia. Though he makes fun of the others for their excessive greed, and though he gets away with many of his tricks, Volpone ultimately proves insatiably greedy for pleasure and trickery. Instead of quitting while he is ahead, Volpone fakes his death, creating a chaos in which he is ultimately discovered, stripped of his wealth, and effectively sentenced to execution.

Mosca – Mosca's name means fly, and like a fly, Mosca buzzes around whispering in the ears of all the other characters in the play. He is Volpone's parasite, meaning hanger-on, and he makes his living by doing Volpone's bidding. Mosca writes and stages a small play within the play, and through that play he orchestrates Volpone's elaborate ruses, showing his masterful usage of language and acute improvisational skills. He is praised for his "quick fiction," which can be drawn in parallel with the playwright's "quick comedy," referred to in the Prologue. Mosca, thus, can be seen as an analogue for Jonson himself. Mosca takes joy in working for Volpone, but he's treacherous above all: he easily convinces Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino that he is on each of their sides (when he's really on Volpone's side alone), and then, when he spies an opportunity to trick even Volpone, he takes it. During Volpone's faked death, Mosca assumes the role as his heir, inverts the social structure by acting above his rank, and he ultimately causes all of the ruses to unravel in an attempt to win part of Volpone's fortune for himself.

Voltore – Voltore means "vulture," and, true to his name, Voltore is one of the Italian men lurking around Volpone's deathbed hoping to inherit his wealth. He is a well-spoken lawyer, and Mosca praises him disingenuously for his ability to speak so well and argue any side of a case. Later in the play, when Volpone is accused of raping Celia, Voltore uses his masterful language skills to convince the court (the Avocatori) that Volpone seem innocent. Voltore seems go back and forth between being ruled by a conscience and by his greed. When he believes that Volpone is dead and Mosca has been named the heir, he recants his testimony before the Avocatori out of guilt. But when Voltore learns that he still might inherit Volpone's fortune, he pretends to be possessed by the devil to argue that his original false testimony was true. The play emphasizes the importance of language, which might be the reason (in addition to his flashes of moral integrity) that Voltore's punishment at the play's end is less severe than the punishments of other characters.

Corbaccio – Corbaccio's name means "raven." Another bird of prey figure, he is a doddering old man who, like Voltore and Corvino, hopes to be named Volpone's heir. Corbaccio doesn't hear well, and he is old and infirm, so his hope is only to live longer than Volpone. Whenever he receives news of Volpone's (false) illness, Corbaccio openly expresses joy, even saying that hearing that Volpone is dying fills him with youth and energy. Part of Corbaccio's desire for wealth seems altruistic, as he wants to leave his own fortune to his son Bonario. However, Mosca is easily able to manipulate Corbaccio into disinheriting Bonario. While Corbaccio initially does this in the hope of increasing the wealth he'll eventually leave to his son, Corbaccio ultimately becomes corrupted and caught up in Mosca's schemes, and the court forcibly transfers all of Corbaccio's assets to Bonario.

Bonario – Corbaccio's son. Bonario's name comes from the Italian word for "good," and he represents goodness in the play. He is a valiant, morally righteous figure who maintains family values despite being disinherited by his father. Though Mosca attempts to manipulate him, Bonario is able to resist this manipulation more so than other characters in the play, and he courageously rescues Celia from Volpone's attempted rape. In court, he refuses to lie, and he claims that truth will be his only testimony.

Corvino – Corvino, whose name means "crow," is the final 'bird' hoping to inherit Volpone's wealth. He is a merchant, and he is both greedy and controlling to an extreme. He's cruel to his wife Celia, whom he confines to their home, and he is so jealous of other men looking at her that he tries to prevent her from getting too close to the windows. However, his financial greed proves more powerful than his jealousy and desire for control; having heard that doctors have prescribed a night with a woman as the only cure for Volpone's illness, Corvino tries to force Celia to sleep with Volpone in order to secure his place as Volpone's heir. By the end of the play, Corvino is willing to pretend that Celia cheated on him, preferring to be publicly recognized as a cuckold than to admit that he tried to force his wife into infidelity to obtain someone else's wealth.

Celia – Celia is Corvino's wife and her name means "heaven." She is innocent, good, and religious, and she's faithful to Corvino despite his suspicious. When Volpone tries to rape her she resists, and in court she constantly appeals to heaven to expose Volpone. She represents the Renaissance ideal of a woman: chaste, silent, and obedient. At the play's end, she is freed from her marriage to Corvino by court order, but not necessarily permitted to remarry.

Sir Politic Would-be – Sir Politic Would-be is an English knight, but he only gained his knighthood at a time when the English throne sold knighthoods out to make money. As an English traveler in Venice, he has been warned by travel guides to avoid being corrupted by the loose Italian morals. Politic means "worldly-wise," and Sir Politic attempts to seem so. However, he

is a comic figure because he is extremely gullible, and he tries so hard to give the appearance of being knowledgeable that he agrees to ridiculous fictions and fabricates absurd economic enterprises. Much of the play's subplot is at his expense.

Lady Would-be – Lady Would-be is Sir Politic's wife. In contrast to Celia, who is confined to her home, Lady Would-be is given a lot of freedom, roaming Venice freely. Lady Would-be also contrasts with the Renaissance ideal of a woman, since she is extremely talkative and well educated. She is skilled with language and makes constant literary references, but most of the men in the play (in particular Volpone) find her exceptionally annoying. She constantly chides her staff for not doing a good enough job.

Peregrine – Peregrine's name means "traveler," and he is another English traveler abroad, a counterpoint to Sir Politic Would-be. Sir Politic offers to help Peregrine learn the ways of Venice and avoid corruption, and Peregrine agrees in order to spend time with Sir Politic (whom he considers to be a ridiculous figure) for his own amusement. When Lady Would-be mistakes Peregrine for a prostitute, Peregrine believes he has fallen for a prank of Sir Politic's, and he immediately designs his own prank in revenge.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Nano – Nano's name means "dwarf" in Italian, which is fitting, since Nano is a dwarf. He, along with Androgyno and Castrone, is a servant and fool (jester) to Volpone.

Androgyno – Androgyno means "hermaphrodite" in Italian. Like Nano and Castrone, Androgyno is a companion and entertainer to Volpone.

Castrone – Castrone's name means "eunuch" in Italian. Like Nano and Androgyno, Castrone is a companion to Volpone, but he has very few spoken lines in the play.

Servitore – A servant to Corvino.

Women – Several serving women, attendant on Lady Would-be.

Avocatori – Four magistrates presiding in the court in Venice.

Notario – The court recorder.

Commendatori – Officers in Venice.

Mercatori – Three merchants, used by Peregrine in a prank against Sir Politic Would-be.

Mob / Crowd / Grege – A mob, members of a crowd.

Stone the Fool – A dead English fool who does not appear in the play. Sir Politic Would-be thinks he was a spy.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THEATRE AND APPEARANCE VS REALITY

Like other Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, Jonson explores the relationship between appearance and reality, of seeming versus being—which, of course, evokes the theatre itself. At first glance, much in the play is as it seems. Certain appearances and labels (names, for example) are indicative of reality. Volpone, the fox, is a sly trickster hoping to fool other animals. Mosca, the fly, is his servant, buzzing around and whispering lies into peoples' ears. Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, the vulture, raven, and crow respectively, act like birds of prey, scavenging for Volpone's wealth on his (apparent) deathbed. Most of the play's other characters also have allegorical names that reveal their true selves at first glance. This effect is used for humor (the dwarf has the deadpan name of Nano, which means "dwarf") and to reinforce the play's sense of morality, as the virtuous characters Bonario and Celia are named after, respectively, "good" and "heaven." These characters clearly represent abstract ideals, which is typical of morality plays, a genre which Jonson riffs on in *Volpone*.

While Jonson merges many sources and complicates the typical morality play, the plot of *Volpone* is essentially that of a simple animal fable in which the fox uses cunning to trick birds out of their meals. Appearance, then, can be indicative of reality. At the same time, the trickery in the play suggests that appearance cannot always be trusted. *Volpone* is filled with disguise, deception, and theatre. The characters constantly stage performances to confuse and manipulate on another. Volpone pretends to be mortally ill as part of his ruse, which includes a costume and makeup to appear more convincing. In a completely contrasting role, he also acts as an over-the-top mountebank selling a healing elixir, and later he acts as a court deputy.

Mosca facilitates much of this deception; he deceives Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino into believing that they each will be Volpone's heir, acting as a writer and a director of the play's tricks. Mosca's skills, then, are performance and improvisation—in other words, obscuring reality with theatrical appearances. At one point, Volpone even praises Mosca for his "quick fiction," which draws him into parallel with the playwright himself, since Jonson's "quick comedy" is praised in the play's prologue. As the play unfolds, though, Jonson begins to suggest some of the dangers of deception: some of the disguises in the play, for example, become so convincing they threaten to become real—Volpone worries that pretending to be **diseased** will cause his health to decline, and the ruse in which Volpone

makes Mosca his heir threatens to become reality and rob Volpone of his fortune.

Ultimately, though, the ruses are all revealed. Jonson's opinion on theatre, as indicated in the prologue, is that it should be entertaining and beneficial; theatre can be funny, but it should still contain some moral lesson. In this play, the moral lesson is reinforced through the punishment of pretty much all of the major characters. Volpone and Mosca are exposed and punished for their deception, and so are Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, who by the end of the play have been roped into one of Mosca's ruses. After all the plots have been revealed in court, Bonario says, "Heaven will not let such gross crimes be hid." This line can be used to express the play's overall treatment of appearance and reality. Appearances can be convincing and deceptive, and they can be manipulated for positive gain. However, certain realities—fundamental truths, goodness, and evil—will always make themselves known, despite any attempts to change or hide their appearance. Theatre can create powerful fantasies, but Jonson seems to say that, even in the best performances, truth and goodness will shine through fiction.

MONEY AND COMMERCE

The driving force of the play's plot is desire for money, which propels the three men trying to steal Volpone's fortune and drives Volpone in his attempt to manipulate and swindle them. In the play's opening scene, Volpone shows how much the Italians value money when he delivers a blasphemous speech in which he calls money "the world's soul" and praises it like a god. Money, he says, is everything, and whoever has money is naturally imbued with nobility, valiance, honesty, and wisdom. Numerous other analogies are also used during the play that stress money's importance. Talking to Volpone's fortune, for example, Mosca tells money to "multiply," which personifies wealth by invoking reproduction. Throughout the play, money is also described, through **medicinal** and **alchemical** imagery, as the best, purest cure for all ailments, expanding on Volpone's claim that money makes everything better. In a final, extreme example, Mosca leads Corvino to believe that he will act as Corvino's servant, and he says that for this employment he *owes his very being* to Corvino. Mosca thereby substitutes money and employment for a divine creator, who would typically be credited for a person's existence. It's a telling substitution, because, in the play, material pursuits become a sort of religion for those obsessed with money.

Such excessive emphasis on money is a satire on Venice's stereotypical obsession with commerce. In one sense, Ben Jonson's satire of commerce is purely comedic and ridiculous. Sir Politic Would-Be plans numerous farfetched entrepreneurial schemes with the hope of becoming rich, all the while being ridiculed by Peregrine. This absurd subplot goes as far as Sir Politic pretending to be an imported turtle. But the play also gives a more serious satire in the main plot, in which money is depicted as dangerous and corrupting (as we'll see in more detail in the following theme). The play shows that people are willing to do anything for money, which leads to moral lapses. Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvio, and even Lady Would-Be become convinced that they will inherit Volpone's fortune, and all of them compromise their values and are easily manipulated by Mosca. Corvino is even convinced to offer his wife up as a sexual partner for Volpone to secure his chances at the fortune.

Much of the emphasis on commerce and money comes from the English stereotype of Italians (and in particular Venetians). English playwrights like Jonson saw in Italy a dangerous society in which wealth, competition, and materialism were valued over morality. Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, concerns money and desire for wealth taken to the extreme, and it is also set in Venice (as its title suggests). Part of Jonson's mission as a playwright is to leave the audience with a lesson, and so his satire of the Italian obsession with commerce also expresses the fear that London would fall prey to the same obsession and become morally bankrupt in the pursuit of wealth. In other words, Jonson feared that London would turn into an English version of Venice, in which citizens are fatally, blasphemously obsessed with wealth. The play thus hopes to dissuade viewers and readers from allowing financial matters to outweigh moral ones. This message is heavily reinforced by the play's ending, in which none of the principal characters wind up with any fortune, and Volpone himself winds up with a near death sentence. Money can be taken away easily, since it is impermanent, but the implications of moral lapses are eternal.

GREED AND CORRUPTION

In addition to having a reputation for commerce, Venice (and Italy in general) was stereotypically known for greed and corruption, both moral and political. *Volpone*'s subplot involves fear of spying, but the play's primary interest in corruption is of a different kind; more than political corruption, *Volpone* explores the ways in which people can become morally corrupted.

The Italian men in the play are all corrupted by avarice, which means greed or excessive desire. According to Jonson, desire itself is not inherently evil. Rather, it's avarice—excessive desire—that becomes morally corrupting. Avarice is first presented (as hinted at in the Money and Commerce theme), as financial greed. Again, desire for money isn't inherently bad, but the characters in *Volpone* become corrupted once that desire is excessive. Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino are obsessed with becoming Volpone's heir because they hope to inherit his fortune. Their greed is so strong that they have no regard for Volpone's life; Corbaccio even overtly expresses glee when Mosca lists Volpone's fake symptoms and **diseases**. All three of

the hopeful heirs are driven to extreme moral lapses by their greed, each of which violates a key aspect of society. Voltore, the lawyer, commits perjury and helps Mosca to deceive the court, the play's ultimate source of punishment, authority, and justice. Corbaccio is convinced to disinherit his son, challenging the fundamental means by which wealth was preserved. (Though it could be argued that he only disinherited his son to win Volpone's fortune, thereby increasing the fortune that Corbaccio's son would eventually inherit.) Greed is also sufficient to convince Corvino to break the sanctity of marriage and offer his wife up to Volpone.

Volpone is greedy for money, but his downfall is ultimately caused by excessive greed for pleasure, showing that greed comes in many forms and that, in excess, it is all consuming. Volpone takes immense pleasure in fooling and swindling Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, and it's his inability to stop and settle for the pleasure he's already had that brings him to his demise. After he has almost been discovered and still managed to get away with his plots, Volpone is driven to try to pull off an even more excessive one, going as far to fake his death. This fake death then provides opportunity for Mosca to succumb to greed and turn on Volpone. Victory, then, and excess of anything (especially wealth and pleasure) are corrupting. Put simply, desire for too much of anything is bad.

While the Italian men in the play are morally corrupted by greed in many forms, the play also explores the way Englishmen could be morally corrupted by Italian influence. This dynamic is explored through Sir Politic Would-Be and Peregrine, two English travelers abroad in Italy. Sir Politic offers to help teach Peregrine how to properly be Italian without corrupting his more reserved, English nature. Neither man becomes corrupted in the same sense that the other major characters are (a ruinous obsession with wealth or pleasure), but Peregrine does stage an elaborate ruse to prank Sir Politic, complete with disguises and costumes, which suggests that his time in Venice did influence him to use the type of trickery that Volpone and Mosca abuse.

The play's moral stance towards greed and corruption is outlined by Volpone at the beginning of the play, despite the fact that even he eventually falls prey to it. Volpone says, "What a rare punishment is avarice to itself." The act of being greedy necessarily brings on its own punishment. He is referring to his would-be heirs here, but also unwittingly foretelling his own downfall. Audiences might root for Volpone in his first plots and take pleasure in his ability to manipulate others, but Volpone's desire for pleasure becomes so excessive and insatiable that the play turns on him and ends with his punishment. The harsh sentencing rendered at the end of the play reinforces Jonson's moral lesson to avoid excess: all the men are stripped of their wealth, and it is implied that Volpone will lose his life for his own acquiescence to avarice.

GENDER ROLES AND WOMEN

Most of the play's characters are men who operate in the traditionally male sphere of commerce. At the time in which the play is set, men were wholly responsible for finance and they were expected to have power over women in relationships, roles that most of the male characters in the play firmly occupy. However, the play also compares male authority, love, sex, and courtship to the social expectations of women by exploring two examples of marriages, one an extreme depiction of an Italian marriage and the other a comedic English relationship.

The Italian marriage is between Celia and Corvino. Though Celia is virtuous, she is kept under Corvino's extremely careful and cruel control—Corvino keeps her indoors almost at all times, and he forbids her, at one point, from even venturing too close to a window. Corvino's rule over Celia is extreme, but it was stereotypical for Italian men to be jealous and controlling of their wives. Likewise, Celia represents the stereotypical Renaissance ideal of a woman; she is silent, chaste, and obedient. This is shown to work to both her advantage and disadvantage. Her sterling reputation initially gives her credibility in court, but her testimony is quickly undermined since, as a woman, she was considered to be an unreliable witness (even to a crime of which she was a victim). The power of Celia's reputation cannot stand up to the stereotype that women are too hysterical and emotional to be trustworthy and rational, even though the men who argue against her are known to be deceitful. The cruelty of the impossible position in which Celia finds herself in court illustrates that seventeenth century women couldn't win—no matter how virtuous, women were considered to be untrustworthy and inferior creatures.

Jonson's position on gender roles can be clarified, to an extent, through an examination of Corvino and Volpone, who both try to exhibit male authority over Celia through sexuality (Corvino attempts to whore her to Volpone, who in turn attempts to rape her). For a while, it seems that Volpone will get away with this rape attempt, as several men during the play conspire to say that Celia is lying about her accusation. At the end of the play, Volpone is punished, but it seems that the primary reason for his punishment is his continuous deception of the play's other men, rather than the attempted rape. It's difficult to discern Jonson's ultimate statement (if any exists) about sexual oppression. However, it could be argued that, while he shows sexual oppression and violence to be reprehensible, Jonson believes that the oppression of women is less important than the moral lesson about excessive desire and greed. Lust and rape are bad, in other words, but only because they are a form of avariciousness. The crime Volpone seems most guilty of in the play is excessive greed for money at the expense of Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino.

Lady Would-Be, the second woman in the play, is the opposite of Celia. The play contrasts her marriage to Sir Politic Would-

Be—a quintessentially English marriage—with the Italian marriage between Corvino and Celia. Lady Would-Be is more independent than Celia, which reinforces the stereotype that married English women were given more freedom than married Italian women. Lady Would-Be is able to wander Venice on her own, and she is seen without her husband just as often as with him (contrast this with Celia, who is prevented from even leaving her home). Lady Would-Be is also much more talkative than Celia, though the play doesn't exactly suggest that this is a good thing. When Lady Would-Be visits Volpone, he jokes in asides that she is so long-winded that he's being tortured by her "flood of words," and that, though he's only pretending to be sick, she's actually making him ill by talking ceaselessly. Much of this scene, we can note, is taken from an ancient Greek book called "On Talkative Women," suggesting that Jonson might have believed that there was some truth to the stereotype that woman talk excessively (more generously, one could argue that Jonson is merely engaging with the literary tradition of depicting women in this way). Lady Would-Be, however, also breaks the mold of a renaissance woman in that she appears to be educated, certainly much more so than Celia. Her long-winded speeches are so filled with literary references and allusions that Peregrine is shocked when she yells at him.

The differences between Lady Would-Be and Celia illustrate different societal roles for women in Italy and England, which suggests that gender roles are culturally contingent, rather than biologically determined. In this way, the play challenges stereotypical gender roles and assumptions about women, though it sometimes affirms stereotypes, too. At the very least, *Volpone* complicates the role of women in society by showing that women—like men—can be well read, virtuous, well educated, and well spoken.

LANGUAGE

Throughout *Volpone*, Jonson celebrates quick wit (especially his own), wordplay, and language itself. The play begins with the "Argument" and the "Prologue," both of which stress the playwright's mastery of language. The argument is given in a masterful acrostic, in which each of the seven verses begins with one of the letters of VOLPONE. The prologue then emphasizes that the play itself is of high quality, and assures the audience that the play was written in five weeks without any collaborator or any other input. By the time the play itself begins, audiences have been firmly reassured of Jonson's own wit and skill with language.

Within the play, the skill that separates Volpone and Mosca from the other characters is a brilliant ability to use and manipulate language. Volpone even praises Mosca for his "quick fiction," which echoes the lauding of Jonson's "quick comedy" from the Prologue. Mosca, then, can be seen as embodying some aspects of the playwright within the play. As noted in the Appearance vs Reality theme, Mosca is like a writer and director, using his plays-within-the-play to trick other characters. While Mosca uses disguises to pull off these ruses, language is his most significant means of deception and the greatest source of power in the play. It's Mosca's ability to think and speak on his feet that allows him to deceive Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino so easily, even if they are all in the room together.

The play also emphasizes the importance of language in the court scenes, in which language is equivalent with truth. Voltore, the lawyer with a "**gold**-tipped tongue," is praised (disingenuously) by Mosca at the beginning of the play for his ability to instantly argue either side of a case. In the court scenes, though, Voltore launches into long legal speeches that are so successful that the court becomes convinced by Mosca's ruse (that Volpone didn't attempt to rape Celia). Mosca even tells Volpone to pay Voltore because the language he used was so strong. When asked to put up their own witnesses, Bonario and Celia merely appeal to their consciences and to heaven without saying very much. One of the Avocatori is quick to respond, "These are no testimonies." Though Bonario and Celia cannot properly speak or testify for themselves, their morality is insufficient—their exoneration must occur through language, as Volpone eventually confesses verbally to his crimes. It's also of note that the Avocatori deliver their punishments simply by speaking them, demonstrating the legal power of speech acts. The legal system thus reinforces what Jonson shows in the Argument and Prologue and what Mosca demonstrates throughout the play: language is power.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DISEASE AND MEDICINE

At first glance, **disease** might appear only to be used as a tool for trickery and humor in the play. Volpone's main scam is pretending that he is rife with disease in order to get money out of hopeful heirs to his fortune. In another scam, this time pretending to be a mountebank, Volpone mentions an excessive list of diseases in an absurd sales pitch for a miraculous healing elixir. In both of these scams, any mention of disease is theatrical and comedic. At the same time, however, for contemporary audiences (and for the characters in the play) disease represents a serious, deadly, and mysterious threat. As mentioned at one point by Sir Politic Would-be, Europe was rife with plague, about which little was understood. And while illness was terrifying and dangerous, contemporary doctors offered little comfort. Characters in the play commonly express their utter distrust of doctors, whom

they believe kill patients at will, and characters seek and believe in alternative forms of medicine even beyond cure-all elixirs. Corvino, for example, agrees to let his wife Celia sleep with Volpone as a cure for his ailments. We can also note that despite Volpone's willingness to evoke disease for trickery, he is constantly afraid that acting sick, dwelling on fears, or experiencing displeasure will result in him truly becoming infected. Medicine and disease, then, are often referenced humorously, but they represent deep and legitimate fears for most of the play's characters and for its 17th century audience.

GOLD AND ALCHEMY

On one level, **gold** symbolizes wealth. Gold is physical money, both expensive and luxurious. The opening speech of the play reveals Volpone's obsession with money through an ode to gold, and the first transaction of the play involves a gift of a gold plate. Throughout the play, characters emphasize that gold is what lends objects and people in the world their best qualities. Blasphemously, Volpone even says that gold is brighter than the sun or God himself. The Renaissance understanding of gold, though, was complicated and fluid. Alchemy, an early form of chemistry, taught that metals were all composed of the same material; the only difference between lead and gold was purity. Thus, with the right methods, one could purify lead into gold. This idea of purifying something and scientifically changing it into gold parallels a lowborn person accumulating wealth and becoming highborn, as Mosca almost accomplishes at the end of the play. We can note that, for years, the play was performed with an alternate ending in which Mosca receives Volpone's fortune. The alchemical fluidity of gold also allows it to blend with the play's other symbols, as characters constantly say that gold is the best **medicine**. This is meant figuratively, as characters within the play believe that wealth and gold instill people with heath and excellent qualities, but also literally, as an elixir of drinkable gold was sometimes used as medicine.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *Volpone* published in 2004.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

Dear saint,
Riches, the dumb god, that giv'st 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,
Honour, and all things else. Who can get thee,
He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise.

Related Characters: Volpone (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.1.21-27

Explanation and Analysis

Volpone says these lines during his opening speech, a blasphemous ode to money and gold. The lines are blasphemous because he refers to gold as both a saint and as a replacement for God, who is typically credited with giving humans the ability to do things. He continues the blasphemy by saying that money can make hell worth the same as heaven, a theological impossibility. Volpone is also articulating here the force that will propel the play's plot: that people are willing to do anything—even preposterous, dangerous things—for gold. It's a dark irony that Volpone is so aware of this, since his own lust for gold gets him in so much trouble at the end of the play.

The notion that riches give men tongues has a dual meaning. First is the blasphemous assertion that gold gives humans the ability to speak. At the same time, all of the play's most clever and inventive language is spoken in order to gain wealth. In this sense, riches give men tongues in that gaining wealth is an incentive to speak cleverly. Finally, the line might obliquely reference the fact that the playwright, Ben Jonson himself made a living and earned money by writing and creating speeches for his characters.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

Mosca: This is true physic, this your sacred medicine;
No talk of opiates to this great elixir!

Corbaccio: 'Tis *aurum palpabile*, if not *potabile*.

Related Characters: Mosca, Corbaccio (speaker), Volpone

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.4.71-72

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange occurs during a scene in which Volpone is pretending to be ill to swindle his suitors. After Mosca says that Volpone has no faith in doctors or in medicine,

Corbaccio offers gold to Volpone, and Mosca responds that gold is the true, sacred, medicine, calling it a great elixir. This continues the play's pattern of blaspheming by substituting gold for God. Also note that "elixir" in alchemy is a substance that gives eternal life or transforms any metal into gold, so this comment reveals a deeper connection between gold and health than the simple notion that wealth imbues a person with unrelated qualities (like health or honor).

Corbaccio's line in Latin translates to "it is gold that can be felt, if not drunk." Drinking gold refers to the process of dissolving and drinking gold as a medicine, a tradition slightly different than (but related to) notions of alchemical elixir. In both cases, money is given healing properties and it is synonymous with health, so much so that Corbaccio almost takes the gold back since he wants Volpone to die, not recover.

❝ What a rare punishment is avarice to itself!

Related Characters: Volpone (speaker), Corvino, Corbaccio, Voltore, Mosca

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.4.142-143

Explanation and Analysis

Volpone speaks this line—perhaps the key line of the play—after he and Mosca have successfully fooled Corbaccio into thinking that Volpone is dying and that Corbaccio will be the heir to Volpone's fortune. The line, we can note, is a quote from the philosopher Seneca, and Volpone is using it as a castigation of Corbaccio, whose avarice (excessive desire) has led him to be fooled by Volpone and Mosca into giving Volpone expensive gifts. While presumably Volpone thinks that this trick itself is Corbaccio's punishment, he seems not to realize that the trick is also an example of Volpone's own avarice, and thus he has just predicted his own downfall. In fact, the significance of the prophetic line is even more far-reaching: each of the play's morally corrupt characters will ultimately suffer a devastating punishment because of their avaricious behavior. The underlying moral of the play is summed up by Volpone's quote: excessive desire becomes corrupting, and corruption ultimately leads to punishment once the truth comes out.

Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

❝ The weeping of an heir should still be laughter
Under a visor.

Related Characters: Mosca (speaker), Volpone, Corvino

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.5.22-23

Explanation and Analysis

Mosca speaks this line to Corvino after Corvino, who believes himself to be Volpone's heir (and thus wants Volpone to die), disingenuously expresses sadness that Volpone is so sick. Here, Mosca is instructing Corvino on how to properly manipulate appearances to conceal reality, saying that Corvino should be happy and act sad, which Mosca knows is exactly what Corvino is already doing. While this line is meant to underscore that none of the suitors care at all about Volpone or his health (they all disregard his life and health in favor of his money), it also has an added level of meaning. Since none of the suitors (the presumptive heirs) will ultimately inherit, Mosca is subtly and cheekily admitting that he and Volpone are laughing at the misfortune of the suitors.

❝ O, sir, the wonder,
The blazing star of Italy! a wench
Of the first year, a beauty ripe as harvest!
Whose skin is whiter than a swan all over,
Than silver, snow, or lilies; a soft lip,
Would tempt you to eternity of kissing!
And flesh that melteth in the touch to blood!
Bright as your gold, and lovely as your gold!

Related Characters: Mosca (speaker), Corvino, Celia, Volpone

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.5.108-114

Explanation and Analysis

Mosca delivers these lines to Volpone in order to describe Corvino's beautiful wife Celia. The speech is in the form of a blazon, a love poem in which the speaker praises the

beloved by focusing on different body parts—in this case skin, lips, and flesh. Typical to the blazon form is interplay between imagery of red and white, seen in the white skin, swan, silver, and snow imagery (note also the alliteration) paired with the red blood and lips. The ultimate praise for money obsessed Mosca and Volpone is the comparison of Celia to Volpone's gold, which is reinforced through repetition. It's also notable that Mosca uses celestial imagery at the start of the blazon; this resonates with Celia's name, which is a reference to heaven.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

I rather pity their folly and indiscretion, than their loss of time and money; for those may be recover'd by industry: but to be a fool born, is a disease incurable.

Related Characters: Volpone (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.2.159-162

Explanation and Analysis

While disguised as an Italian mountebank and selling a magical cure-all elixir, Volpone tells the crowd that the competing mountebanks are fools who wasted their time trying to replicate his elixir. Though Volpone is not a moral character, some of the play's most moral lines come, ironically, from his mouth, and this is one of them. In this case, Volpone is claiming that money is impermanent and it is not the most important thing in life as the stereotypically greedy Venetians would believe. One can always make or lose money, he implies, but loss of morals, reputation, or character can be permanent. It's worth noting that this is more a sales tactic than something that Volpone says in earnest—in character as the mountebank, Volpone is careful not to seem as though he's selling the elixir to earn money so that the crowd is more likely to believe his promises. Thus Volpone, throughout the play, moralizes while still being corrupt.

It's also of note that what Volpone truly associates with permanence is disease. Volpone pretends to be sick in the play, but throughout it he slowly reveals his fear that his act will somehow cause him to become truly and irreversibly sick. It makes sense, then, that what he apparently pities most (stupidity) is figured as an incurable disease.

Why, the whole world is but as an empire, that empire as a province, that province as a bank, that bank as a private purse to the purchase of it.

Related Characters: Volpone (speaker), Corvino, Celia

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.2.234-236

Explanation and Analysis

Volpone delivers these lines as the Italian mountebank while attempting to impress (and eventually sleep with) Corvino's wife, Celia. These lines might be read as echoing the famous "All the world's a stage" from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, but rather than emphasizing that the world is theatre, this line suggests that everything is a business and that the world can be bought. This is a satire of what Jonson saw as contemporary commerce run amok, and it underscores Jonson's fear that London would adopt the commercial, money obsessed values that he believed were degrading Venice and Italy in general. It's also ironic that Volpone says this in the midst of trying to seduce Celia, whose affections, he reveals later, he believes he can buy. Celia—whose name associates her with heaven—is one of the only people or things in the play that Volpone can't buy, which makes this statement particularly ill-conceived.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

First, I will have this bawdy light damm'd up;
And till 't be done, some two or three yards off,
I'll chalk a line; o'er which if thou but chance
To set thy desp'rate foot, more hell, more honor,
More wild remorseless rage shall seize on thee,
Than on a conjuror that had heedless left
His circle's safety ere his devil was laid.

Related Characters: Corvino (speaker), Volpone, Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.5.50-56

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Corvino is furious with Celia, his wife, because she threw her handkerchief in order to interact with the mountebank, and he's telling her the new, strict rules that she will live under as punishment. Italian wives

were stereotypically known to have less freedom than their English counterparts, but the marriage between Celia and Corvino is extreme.

Celia's name means heaven, and she is a clear embodiment of religion and morality in the play, so the evocation of hell undoubtedly would be terrifying and upsetting for her. The comparison might be especially frightening since Corvino compares himself to a devil that a necromancer conjured but could not control. This is an apt comparison, because Corvino's rage is out of control in this scene. Corvino's fury is also hypocritical and misplaced, since Celia is associated with heaven and goodness. She is completely obedient and places the utmost value on her innocence and virtue. Corvino, on the other hand, has been completely corrupted by greed, to the point that almost immediately after this scene he will pretend that he was kidding and will try to prostitute Celia to Volpone.

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

O! your parasite
Is a most precious thing, dropt from above,
Not bred 'mongst clods and clodpoles, here on earth.
I muse, the mystery was not made a science,
It is so liberally profest! Almost
All the wise world is little else, in nature,
But parasites or sub-parasites.

Related Characters: Mosca (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.1.7-13

Explanation and Analysis

Mosca speaks this blasphemous soliloquy after he has just convinced Corvino to offer Celia up to Volpone. Before, Mosca and Volpone have said that heaven is made of (or is worth the same as) gold. Now, Mosca says that parasites are formed in heaven, which is equally blasphemous. When Mosca declares angelic parasites to be superior to the "clods" and "clodpoles" bred on earth, he is using "clod" for its double meaning—both clay and of idiot. In one sense Mosca reinforces the idea that parasites are superior to other people because regular humans are stupid, and in another sense, Mosca reinforces his blasphemous inversion of typical priorities, since Christian doctrine teaches that man was formed out of clay.

Many characters in the play use the term parasite in a pejorative or derogatory sense, but since Mosca is the play's most skilled user of language, he is able to reclaim the term and use it with pride. Mosca's claim that the whole world is little else "in nature" than parasites or sub-parasites is, in one sense, a commentary on the way that everyone in the world feeds off of one another. At the same time, Mosca is also claiming that he has the ability to see the true nature of the world. This is a cynical statement, as Mosca's viewpoint on the world allows him to manipulate, to toy with appearances, and blatantly lie, and therefore if he does see things as they really are, then the world is a dark place.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

This cannot be a personated passion.

Related Characters: Bonario (speaker), Mosca

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.35

Explanation and Analysis

Bonario observes this about Mosca's angry reaction to Bonario judging him for being a parasite. Bonario is so impressed by this display of emotion—particularly Mosca's claims of honor—that he decides Mosca cannot be faking. This line is filled with dramatic irony and meta-theatricality. Bonario, who represents goodness in the play, underestimates Mosca's ability to act evilly and obscure reality with fiction. Audiences, however, know that Mosca has just bragged extensively about how amazing it is to be a parasite, and they know that Mosca is a master of manipulation and improvisation. The passion is, therefore, personated—Bonario is clearly wrong.

Bonario's line also calls to attention the fact that every passion presented in the play is personated, since it is just acting in a play. While this makes it seem like theatre is powerful enough to fake anything and conceal everything, Bonario holds the moral position (one ultimately validated by the play) that the truth will eventually come out, despite characters' virtuosic performances in service of evil. Mosca might be able to momentarily fool Bonario, but Bonario is much more suspicious than the suitors are – possibly because he isn't blinded by greed. Deception might work in the short term, but in the long run truth ultimately wins.

Act 3, Scene 4 Quotes

Before I feign'd diseases, now I have one.

Related Characters: Volpone (speaker), Lady Would-be

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.4.62

Explanation and Analysis

Volpone says this during a visit from Lady Would-be, and the joke is that Lady Would-be is so annoying (she talks so much) that it's as if Volpone has contracted a real disease. This is an example of Jonson seeming to play into the stereotype that women tend to be talkative, and that this is an irritating quality to men. Lady Would-be is exceptionally well-educated for a woman at that time, but instead of being respected for this, Jonson plays up the talkative woman joke at Lady Would-be's expense. This is particularly notable because Lady Would-be's skill set is so similar to Mosca's—like Mosca, she can improvise a speech on any topic—but Mosca is almost revered for his skills, while Lady Would-be is mocked. The play intends to show the contrast in gender roles between English and Italian women, but the contrast between Mosca and Lady Would-be unwittingly shows the double standard for the way that women and men talk. Volpone's joke also expresses his fear that his false disease will actually become real due to his thinking about illness or pretending to be ill. As he reveals in jokes like this one, he is deeply afraid that his false appearance will become his reality.

> I have a little studied physic; but now
> I'm all for music, save, i' the forenoons,
> An hour or two for painting. I would have
> A lady, indeed, to have all letters and art,
> Be able to discourse, to write, to paint,
> But principal, as Plato holds, your music,
> And so does wise Pythagoras, I take it,
> Is your true rapture: when there is concent
> In face, in voice, and clothes: and is, indeed,
> Our sex's chiefest ornament.

Related Characters: Lady Would-be (speaker), Volpone

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.4.67-76

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Would-be says this to Volpone while attempting to prescribe him treatments to get better. According to her, a lady should be able to read and write, to paint and talk, and to play music, which is an extremely progressive statement, as women back then were not typically educated. At the same time, Lady Would-be says that what she values most is harmony ("concent") between a woman's face, voice, and clothing. Lady Would-be is obsessed with appearances and superficiality, so despite her education, literacy, and skill with language, she still locates her value as a person in her appearance. While the opinion that external harmony is a woman's best trait is not a progressive one, it's not a surprise that Lady Would-be would believe this—throughout the play, characters (and even the playwright) have mocked her for her intellect. Nobody seems to appreciate her various skills, though appearances have been valued above almost all else (Corvino even seems to believe that certain characteristics, like honor, are *only* based on appearance). Thus, it makes sense that Lady Would-be values her appearance above all else, but it's not a compelling excuse for shallow values, either. For example, Celia, a woman subject to similar cultural forces (she's Italian, not British, but is still often valued for her looks), values her honor above all else, and declares that she wishes she could sacrifice her looks for her honor. Both Celia's and Lady Would-be's relationships to their appearances show how fraught a topic appearance was for women at that time and how difficult it was for a woman to be seen for anything—including intellect or honor—other than her looks.

Act 3, Scene 7 Quotes

> Honour! Tut, a breath:
> There's no such thing in nature; a mere term
> Invented to awe fools. What is my gold
> The worse for touching, clothes for being look'd on?

Related Characters: Corvino (speaker), Volpone, Celia

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.7.38-41

Explanation and Analysis

When Corvino is trying to convince Celia to have sex with

Volpone, Celia asks why he has lost all sense of honor, and Corvino responds with this argument about how honor doesn't exist. To Corvino, honor is a concept intended to manipulate fools, and, though a person may appear honorable or have an honorable reputation, there is no substance behind the trait.

It's difficult to say if this speech is given in earnest. Corvino certainly isn't an honorable man, so it might be easiest for him to bear his own corruption if he believes what he says. It's also a handy way to convince Celia to do his bidding. Nonetheless, later in the play Corvino becomes very concerned with shame, embarrassment, and his reputation, so some of this speech rings a little hollow.

With his analogy to gold, Corvino treats Celia like a commodity, which is unsurprising since he is obsessed with controlling her. It's also worth noting that using commercial terms to talk about love was commonplace then. Regardless, Celia finds this argument unconvincing, which (since she is one of the two moral characters) should be seen as a proxy for Jonson's position on the matter.

> O God, and his good angels! whither, whither,
> Is shame fled human breast? that with such ease,
> Men dare put off your honours, and their own?
> Is that, which ever was a cause of life,
> Now plac'd beneath the basest circumstance,
> And modesty an exile made, for money?

Related Characters: Celia (speaker), Volpone, Corvino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.7.133-138

Explanation and Analysis

Celia cries out in exasperation when Corvino leaves after trying to convince her to have sex with Volpone. Celia, whose name means heaven, evokes God and his angels in order to make a moral point. This is a clear contrast to the other characters in the play who substitute money for God; unlike them, Celia is the play's righteous, religious figure. In these lines, she is able to rightly identify the play's moral message: people are being corrupted by their excessive desires, especially for money, causing them to blaspheme against God and discard any sense of honor and shame. She also notes how dangerous these desires are, particularly because they make it so *easy* for Corvino and the other men to act this way. Because women were forced to be subservient to men, Celia's only recourse here is to pray and appeal to a man of higher power (i.e. God). This shows the precariousness of her situation as a woman—she is alone with Volpone who is willing to rape her, and all she has on her side is morality.

> Good sir, these things might move a mind affected
> With such delight; but I, whose innocence
> Is all I can think wealthy, or worth th' enjoying,
> And which, once lost, I have nought to lose beyond it,
> Cannot be taken with these sensual baits.

Related Characters: Celia (speaker), Volpone, Corvino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.7.205-208

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Volpone has tried to convince Celia to sleep with him by showing her all the riches that she might be queen of, but Celia is not interested. Contrasting with most of the other characters in the play, Celia has conventional values. She cares about her innocence, an internal quality, more than she cares about money. Money can be made, lost, and re-earned. It is impermanent. The loss of innocence and honor, on the other hand, are permanent, so Celia knows to value them above material possessions. Losing money might be frustrating, but, despite what Volpone and Mosca think of heaven, money has no consequences after life. To Celia, Christian innocence has eternal consequences.

It's also of note that Celia calls the wealth Volpone offers "sensual baits." This type of language fits in the common renaissance trope of courtship in which the man is depicted as a tamer and the woman a wild animal. This trope is so ingrained in the social order, and Celia is so bound to her role as submissive woman, that she uses this type of language to describe herself.

If you have ear that will be pierc'd - or eyes
That can be open'd-a heart that may be touch'd-
Or any part that yet sounds man about you –
If you have touch of holy saints: or heaven-
Do me the grace to let me scape: - if not,
Be bountiful and kill me. You do know,
I am a creature, hither ill betray'd,
By one whose shame I would forget it were:
If you will deign me neither of these graces,
Yet feed your wrath, sir, rather than your lust
(It is a vice comes nearer manliness,)
And punish that unhappy crime of nature,
Which you miscall my beauty.

Related Characters: Celia (speaker), Lady Would-be , Volpone, Corvino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.7.239-251

Explanation and Analysis

Celia speaks these lines in the scene during which Corvino offers Celia up to Volpone in exchange for money. By this point, Celia is desperate to stave off Volpone, and she makes the extreme plea that killing her would be more generous than raping her, because it would leave her innocence intact.

Celia understands that Volpone is possessed by his excessive desires, and she requests that he indulge one excessive desire—wrath—over the other, lust. She also seems to blame herself, to some degree, for his lust, as she calls her own beauty a "crime of nature" and invites him to destroy it. This opinion towards beauty is almost the exact opposite of Lady Would-be's, who values external appearance above all else. Celia shows here that she values innocence and purity most of all, and that she considers lust and beauty to be corrupting.

It's also notable that Celia makes a small appeal to Volpone's manliness, which makes sense, given that Volpone and Corvino both constantly assert their right as men to dominate and control her. Celia's powerlessness is, again, on display here, as her comment that wrath is a manlier impulse than lust is one of the only defenses she has left, and it's a defense that still invites him to harm her.

Fall on me, roof, and bury me in ruin!
Become my grave, that wert my shelter! O!
I am unmask'd, unspirited, undone,
Betray'd to beggary, to infamy—

Related Characters: Volpone (speaker), Bonario, Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.7.275-278

Explanation and Analysis

Volpone speaks these lines after attempting and failing to rape Celia, who is then brought to court by Bonario, presumably to testify against Volpone. Distraught, he cries out that he is "unmask'd," meaning that his disguise has been seen through, which causes him to lose his new youthful spirit. This is equivalent to (and leads to) his undoing, which Ben Jonson emphasizes through the repetition of "un" ("unmask'd, unspirited, undone"). The charges of attempted rape might frustrate him, but what Volpone really regrets is that his theatrical role of the diseased invalid might have to come to an end, because it is from that ruse that he gains his truest pleasure. Volpone's call for his shelter to become his grave echoes the play's moral lesson and his earlier statement that avarice becomes a punishment to itself. His deceptions have been his means of making money and receiving pleasure, but they will ultimately lead to his downfall. It is also of note that *Volpone* is often performed with masks emphasizing the animal names of each character, making "unmask'd" a potential meta-theatrical pun.

Act 4, Scene 5 Quotes

I would I could forget I were a creature.

Related Characters: Celia (speaker), Volpone, Corvino, Voltore, Bonario, Avocatori

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.5.102

Explanation and Analysis

Celia makes this exclamation during the court scene, in which Voltore is expertly testifying in front of the Avocatori to convince them that Celia is lying. This simple line is a perfect encapsulation of Celia's pain and suffering, as well as her powerlessness. She has no real means of being heard and is constantly overpowered by men. She is about to lose her reputation, and her only recourse is to tragically wish that she could forget that she is a living being. When she uses the word "creature," this evokes the notion that she has been created by God. Since the other characters in the play often substitute gold for God and money and employment

for the creator, it's possible that Celia is wishing that she could forget she was a creature of God in the way that the others so often do. However, since she is innocent and pure (and because her name means heaven), she cannot forget and thus she must suffer.

Act 4, Scene 6 Quotes

I will conclude with this,
That vicious persons, when they're hot and flesh'd
In impious acts, their constancy abounds:
Damn'd deeds are done with greatest confidence.

Related Characters: Voltore (speaker), Mosca, Volpone, Bonario, Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.6.50-53

Explanation and Analysis

Voltore speaks these lines to close his lengthy speech in the court scene, during which he accuses Bonario and Celia of creating an elaborate evil plan. The lines showcase some of his exceptional, lawyerly language ability. For one, his speech sounds official and damning because he makes use of alliteration with the "d" sound in the last line ("damn'd deeds done). The lines are also heavily ironic because, in a way, Voltore is actually describing himself, the other suitors, and especially Volpone and Mosca, rather than Celia and Bonario. He argues that those doing bad deeds try to seem innocent and constant, but this innocence is simply a result of confidence, and sometimes overconfidence can be a sign of bad intentions. The irony is that Mosca has manipulated all of the suitors using extreme confidence, while Celia and Bonario appear confident because they know they are innocent.

Act 5, Scene 2 Quotes

True, they will not see 't.
Too much light blinds 'em, I think. Each of 'em
Is so possest and stuft with his own hopes
That anything unto the contrary,
Never so true, or never so apparent,
Never so palpable, they will resist it—

Related Characters: Mosca (speaker), Celia, Corvino, Corbaccio, Voltore, Volpone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.2.22-27

Explanation and Analysis

Volpone and Mosca have just narrowly avoided being exposed, and they are reflecting on the scam that has happened during the course of the play. Volpone marvels at how Mosca has been able to convince Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino that they are all going to inherit the fortune, and that Mosca is on each of their sides respectively, all without them suspecting anything.

The "light" blinding the suitors could be imagery suggesting light reflecting off of gold, which Mosca and Volpone have claimed shines brighter than the sun. Mosca's comment that the suitors are so "possest and stuft" with their own hopes that they are blinded to the truth is filled with meaning. Both possessed and stuffed can have meanings indicating wealth – possessed means in possession of property and a "stuffed man" is a wealthy person of substance. These meanings underscore what the suitors are after: material wealth. Possessed also carries the meaning of being controlled or influenced (either by an idea or a demon), and, likewise, stuffed can mean stopped up in reference to the organs, bodily humors, or the brain, indicating that normal processes or thoughts are prevented. Thus, Mosca indicates that the suitors are mentally, physically, and spiritually corrupted by their financial greed. This corruption affects them in the way that the play deems worst of all: it prevents them from properly distinguishing between appearance and reality.

There are two other possible interpretations of "stuft" worth noting. First, stuffed could refer to eating to the point of surfeit, adding gluttony to the suitors' sins along with greed. Second, stuffed was also contemporarily used to refer to stuffed animals (early modern taxidermy). In this usage, Mosca could be joking with the play's animal fable trope, suggesting that toying with the hopes of the suitors is akin to unnaturally preserving them. They retain the appearance of life (hope at gaining the fortune), and Volpone is able to profit off of them, but their hopes are really non-existent, since none of them will ever get Volpone's money.

All of these meanings demonstrate Mosca's skilled ability to use language, and they lend some credibility to his claim to hold the power of having the ability to manipulate appearances while maintaining the unique ability to see world as it really is.

Act 5, Scene 5 Quotes

So, now I have the keys, and am possest.
Since he will needs be dead afore his time,
I'll bury him, or gain by 'm: I'm his heir,
And so will keep me, till he share at least.
To cozen him of all, were but a cheat
Well plac'd; no man would construe it a sin:
Let his sport pay for't. This is call'd the Fox-trap.

Related Characters: Mosca (speaker), Volpone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.5.11-17

Explanation and Analysis

Mosca speaks this soliloquy after Volpone decides to stage another ruse and fake his own death. Mosca has been named heir in order to torture all of the other suitors. The word "possest" (possessed) here has multiple meanings. In the first sense, Mosca means that he is legally in possession of Volpone's wealth and property. After spending his life as a low-born parasite, he's now officially jumped to a higher class as a landowner. Possessed can also mean controlled or influenced, and it suggests what Mosca will go on to show in the following lines: he has become possessed (and therefore corrupted) by avarice. Mosca even uses the word in this sense in Act 5 Scene 2 when he explains why the suitors have been unable to see through his scams; he says they are "possest" with their own hopes for money. It's possible that Mosca recognizes that he, too has, become corrupted by his greed, but like Volpone (and the other suitors), he's unable to stop himself. It's also of note that possessed can mean controlled by a demon, devil, or evil spirit, which Voltore will pretend to be in court towards the end of the play.

It's unclear what causes Mosca to make the decision to steal from Volpone. He previously told Volpone they should quit while they are ahead, so it's possible that Mosca wants to punish Volpone for his excessive desire for pleasure. Given the play's moral message and the fact that Mosca says he's been "possest," it seems likely that Mosca has finally been corrupted by wealth, and he simply acts this way for financial gain. Regardless of the exact reason, he argues that no one would call stealing from Volpone a sin, since Volpone's ruses should bring him punishment. In this way, Mosca echoes the play's moral lesson that avarice is a punishment to itself. At the same time, he demonstrates again how knowing the moral lesson does not prevent one from falling prey to it, since he is falling into the same trap of avarice and will ultimately face punishment because of it as well. It's also notable that Mosca's new plan is given a name, almost like a play. The "Fox-trap" is reminiscent of Hamlet's play within a play staged to catch his uncle called "the Mouse Trap."

Act 5, Scene 11 Quotes

To make a snare for mine own neck! and run
My head into it, wilfully! with laughter!
When I had newly scap'd, was free and clear
Out of mere wantonness! O, the dull devil
Was in this brain of mine when I devis'd it,
And Mosca gave it second; he must now
Help to sear up this vein, or we bleed dead.

Related Characters: Volpone (speaker), Mosca

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.11.1-7

Explanation and Analysis

Volpone speaks this soliloquy on one side of the stage while most of the rest of the characters await him in court. By "make a snare for his own neck," Volpone means he has created his own noose—he realizes that he has caused his own downfall. It's his own choices ("wilfully") and his own desire for pleasure ("with laughter") that lead him to his current predicament: Voltore is recounting the lies he told to protect Volpone. Volpone curses himself for starting the new scam the very moment he was free, just for the pleasure of debauchery. He's fulfilled the moral prophesy he made at the beginning of the play; his avarice is a punishment to itself. It's also of note that Volpone relies on Mosca to save him, and that he uses physical, medicinal imagery to depict his terrible situation. Metaphorically, he is now truly diseased.

Act 5, Scene 12 Quotes

Heaven could not long let such gross crimes be hid.

Related Characters: Bonario (speaker), Corvino, Corbaccio, Voltore, Mosca, Volpone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.12.98

Explanation and Analysis

Bonario speaks this line in court after Volpone has revealed himself and the entire plot. This sentiment speaks perfectly to the play's treatment of appearance versus reality and to the play's moral lesson. The powers of theatre and language can manipulate appearances, and for a while, Mosca and Volpone were successful in fooling everyone. However, Bonario argues that the realities of truth, goodness, evil, and morality will always be revealed before too long. In a religious interpretation, it's heaven and the will of God that reveals these truths. According to another interpretation, though (one seemingly offered by the play's moral lesson), it's the very evil deeds and avarice that bring themselves to light. Mosca and Volpone probably would have gotten away with everything if not for Volpone's own excessive desire for pleasure and for ruses. Once again, avarice is a punishment to itself.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE ARGUMENT

This section, the opening to the play, is a very general plot summary of the play given in a clever acrostic, where the first letter of each of the seven lines in the section spells out the play's title, V O L P O N E. The acrostic explains that Volpone is wealthy and childless, and that he pretends to be **sick** and has offered to name several people as inheritors of his wealth. His parasite (Mosca), meaning his servant or hanger-on, fools all the people hoping to inherit Volpone's wealth, and weaves cross-plots which are all eventually exposed. The characters of the play try new tricks to save themselves and have some success, but in trying to take advantage of each other, everyone winds up betrayed and ruined.

The Argument introduces the main plot, as well as the main themes of the play. The form of the acrostic itself stresses the playwright's skill with language and it foreshadows the way language will be valued in the play. The acrostic also introduces from the onset the play's moral goal—Jonson tells us immediately that the characters will be blinded by greed and thus precipitate their own ruin.

PROLOGUE

The Prologue is delivered by an undesignated speaker, who opens with the hope that luck and wit will make the play a hit, and that the play will fit the fashionable tastes of audiences. The speaker then explains the aim of the playwright has been to "mix profit with your pleasure," meaning to write a play that amuses and pleases the audience while also teaching it a meaningful lesson.

While some plays have a character called "prologue" or "chorus" to deliver opening lines such as these, Volpone does not. The Prologue here outlines Jonson's belief that theater should be entertaining, but also teach the audience a lesson. The play that follows will be a comedy, but it will also contain moral content.

After outlining the play's goal of teaching a moral lesson, the speaker responds to supposedly envious critics of the playwright who have said things like "all he writes is railing" (meaning that all Jonson writes are personal insults) or ridiculed him for taking so long to produce plays.

These insults to Jonson's critics are probably in response to Thomas Dekker and John Marston, who made fun of Jonson in their own plays for taking so long to write.

The actor delivering the Prologue continues Jonson's response to other playwrights, saying that this play (*Volpone*) was written singlehandedly by Jonson in only five weeks. The speaker assures that the play's content is excellent, giving numerous examples of bad things not included in the play, including broken eggs or "quaking custards." The speaker claims that Jonson doesn't use tricks or tired jokes to fill gaps in his writing, and that he doesn't plagiarize.

Jonson's insistence on responding to his critics publicly shows the vibrant theatrical culture of the time. Audiences would have understood the offstage drama that Jonson was referencing, such as his mention of "quaking custards," which refers to a specific John Marston play that Jonson often ridiculed.

Instead, Jonson makes jokes that fit within his story, and he presents "quick comedy" that will please the best of critics. He observes all the rules of time, place, and character consistency, and he has used almost every last drop of his wit in preparing the play. The playwright hopes that the audience's cheeks will be so red with laughter by the end of the play that they look fresh and red even a week later.

Jonson's prologue concludes by reaffirming his exemplary skills as a playwright and by touting the excellence of the play that is about to unfold. The reference to Jonson's "quick comedy" will be echoed later in the play when Volpone praises Mosca for his "quick fiction."

ACT 1, SCENE 1

In Volpone's home in Venice, Italy, the wealthy Volpone greets the day and his **gold**, and he instructs his hanger-on, Mosca, to reveal his treasure. Volpone then begins an ode to money, which he calls "the world's soul" and his own soul. He says that he's gladder to see his gold than the earth is glad to see the sun, and he goes on to say that his gold outshines the sun like a flame at night or the first light during creation. He calls gold the "son of Sol" that is brighter than its father, and he says he wants to kiss and adore every piece of "sacred treasure in this blessèd room."

Volpone's opening ode to gold shows immediately how commerce and money are connected with greed and corruption. By speaking about gold as if it is even greater than God and as if it created the universe, Volpone blasphemes. This shows from the outset how obsession with wealth can shift one's moral priorities. His speech also references alchemy, since alchemists believed that gold was fathered by the sun.

Volpone continues, saying that the poets were right to call the best age in history the "golden age," since **gold** is the best thing in the world, surpassing joy. Gold is so beautiful and loved, he says, that when gold became Venus's (the Goddess of love's) aura, it functionally surrounded her with twenty thousand cupids.

The "golden age" is a reference to the Roman poet Ovid and his work The Metamorphosis. *Again, Volpone places an excessive emphasis on the value of gold. He also introduces the idea, explored throughout the play, that gold instils people (here Goddesses) with their best qualities.*

Still speaking to his "dear saint," Volpone says that riches are the silent god that gives men the ability to speak, that can do nothing and yet makes men do everything. **Gold** is the price of souls. Hell, if you add gold to it, is worth the same as heaven. Gold is "virtue, fame, honor," and everything in the world. Whoever has gold is made noble, valiant, honest, and wise by default.

Volpone makes another blasphemous series of comments about gold, and then implies, once again, that qualities like honor don't come from inside a person—instead, Volpone believes that these qualities come from merely having gold or appearing wealthy.

Mosca cuts off Volpone by agreeing, and he says that riches are better than wisdom. Volpone agrees, but says that he gives more glory to the unconventional method he uses to gain wealth than to the fact that he has so much money. He doesn't use any trade or risky commerce, he doesn't farm, he doesn't raise animals, and he doesn't have any mills to produce commodities. He's not an artisan, nor a merchant risking money on ships that might sink in the ocean. He doesn't use banks or lend money at interest.

Volpone is knowledgeable about all the conventional and emerging ways to make money, but his true passion isn't commerce or making as much money as possible. Despite his understanding of the way that wealth gives a person qualities that are typically thought of as internal, and despite his blasphemous praise of gold, what Volpone truly values (and is greedy for) above all else is the pleasure he receives in swindling other people.

Mosca continues, saying that Volpone also doesn't take the wealth of other heirs, like many do, by tearing fathers away from families, since Volpone's sweet nature prevents him from doing so. The other reason he doesn't is because Volpone doesn't want widows or orphans crying all around his property. Mosca says Volpone isn't like a greedy farmer who harvests corn but eats bad weeds to hoard his keep, or like a merchant who fills his ship with expensive wines but only drinks cheap dregs. He won't stay in bad conditions to save money. Rather, Volpone knows how to spend his money, giving some to Mosca, some to a dwarf, a hermaphrodite, and a eunuch, and spending on everything that allows him to live in comfort and in pleasure.

For a moment, it seems that Mosca is praising Volpone for his character, but in reality, the only reason Volpone doesn't tear apart families is because he would be annoyed by weeping orphans. This passage shows, for the first time, that Volpone is not motivated by wealth alone: he is interested in comfort and contentment, though he has no moral scruples about how to achieve these goals and he seems to think that gold is the quickest route.

Volpone pays Mosca and says that Mosca is right in everything he says. Those who call Mosca a parasite, Volpone says, are just jealous. Volpone then instructs Mosca to bring in the dwarf, the eunuch, and the fool and Mosca exits to get them. Alone on stage, Volpone asks what he should do other than indulge his desires and live with all the delights that his fortune demands. He has no wife, no parents, and no children or friends to whom he could give his wealth when he dies. Since the money will go to whomever Volpone names heir, men flatter him and petition him, and women and men of all ages bring him presents and money, hoping that when he dies (which they believe will be soon), they'll gain everything back and more by inheriting his fortune.

The term parasite means hanger-on or follower. Like a parasite feeds on another creature, Mosca lives only off of Volpone's wealth. While this term is insulting, Volpone legitimizes Mosca's role, and throughout the play Mosca shows that he even embraces the term parasite. Volpone also claims here that his fortune demands that he indulge himself (which involves immoral actions). This suggests that wealth is innately corrupting, or it least that it has the innate potential to corrupt.

The greediest of these suitors try to out-do one another, competing in gifts and undermining each other, all the while trying to seem like they love Volpone. Volpone endures all of this, toying with their hope of inheriting his money so that he can profit from them. He continues to take more and more from them, all the while leading them on and convincing them that they will be named his heir.

The suitors, too, seem to have been corrupted by the possibility of inheriting a vast fortune, as they're faking love for Volpone and undermining one another. Meanwhile, Volpone preys on their corrupt hopes, which itself is unbelievably cruel.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Mosca re-enters the room in Volpone's house, bringing with him Nano (the dwarf), Androgyno (the hermaphrodite), and Castrone (the eunuch) as per Volpone's request. Nano, speaking in rhyme, announces that they've come to entertain, though they will not perform a classical play. He begins the performance by saying that within Androgyno is the soul of the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras.

This small play-within-the-play shows Volpone's overt interest in theatricality; like the opening of the play in which Jonson discussed other playwrights, this moment is meant to draw the audience's attention to the fact that everything onstage is fiction rather than reality. Androgyno's comical claim to have the same soul as Pythagoras references Pythagoras' famous belief in transmigration of souls, meaning that one's soul is reincarnated in different lifetimes.

Nano begins tracing the supposed lineage of Androgyno's (and thereby Pythagoras's) soul: it started from Apollo, who breathed it into Aethalides (Mercury's son). From Aethalides the soul transmigrated to Euphorbus, who was killed by Menelaus in the Trojan War. After Euphorbus, the soul went to Hermotimus, then to Pyrrhus of Delos (both Greek philosophers), before going to Pythagoras himself. After Pythagoras's death, the soul went to Aspasia (apparently a whore), then Crates the Cynic (another philosopher), and since then "kings, knights, and beggars, knaves, lords, and fools" have all had the soul, as well as numerous animals.

As Nano relates it, Pythagoras's soul moved from demigods to soldiers until it (apparently) took a liking to Greek philosophers and wound up in Pythagoras. The notion that one soul can be a king in one life and a beggar in the next is at odds with the rigidity of social classes in England at the time the play was written, mirroring Ben Jonson's own difficult climb up the social ranking to become a renowned poet and playwright in the English court.

Nano then asks Androgyno about the most recent transformations, and the two joke that in past lives Androgyno has bounced between religions and therefore observed and broken many customs, such as abstaining from fish or eating fish on fast days. Androyno's soul went from Carthusian to Protestant, from a mule to a Puritan, and finally transmigrated to Androgyno, whom Nano calls "a creature of delight… an hermaphrodite." Nano asks Androgyno which of all the forms he might choose, and Androgyno says he prefers his current form. Nano asks if Androgyno prefers this form to get the benefits of being both sexes, but Androgyno says the real reason is the benefit of being a fool, which is the best role anyone can have. Nano says Pythagoras himself would agree, and finishes the performance.

Carthusians are an old order of Catholic monks, and the jokes about conflicting religious perspectives are informed by the fact that Jonson was Catholic (as opposed to a member of the Church of England) when he wrote this play. Thus, once again (as in the opening), Jonson draws attention to his own presence in the play's action. Though the play's primary exploration of gender roles is through a comparison of roles for women, Androgyno complicates this by apparently being both sexes. Ultimately, though, the play within the play concludes with Androgyno emphasizing how great it is to live the carefree life of a fool, which is akin to parasitism.

At the end of the performance, Volpone applauds and asks Mosca if he wrote the script for the show. Mosca confirms that he did write it, then Nano and Castrone sing a song praising fools as the only group worth admiring, since they are free from care and are so entertaining.

Mosca is identified as the author and director of the play within the play, roles he'll reprise throughout the course of the plot as he manipulates all of the would-be heirs.

Outside, someone knocks on the door, and Volpone ends the song and tells Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno to exit. Mosca tells Volpone that he recognizes the person knocking as Voltore, the lawyer, and Volpone instructs Mosca to fetch his disguise and to tell Voltore that the bed sheets are being changed in order to delay him. Mosca exits to obey, and, alone on stage, Volpone says that now his "clients" are starting to visit. He names them as vulture (Voltore), kite, raven and crow, saying they are all birds of prey coming because they think that Volpone is dying. Volpone assures the audience (and himself) that he isn't dying.

As soon as the play within the play ends, Mosca transitions from his role of director of the mini-play to director of ruse, helping Volpone prepare to fool Voltore. The animal names of the suitors are fitting and telling, since (like birds of prey) they circle Volpone hoping to inherit the fortune. The fact that Volpone needs to reassure himself that he isn't dying is key. Throughout the play, he shows glimpses of the fear that somehow the appearance of disease he maintains will be internalized and become reality.

Mosca reenters the room, and Volpone immediately asks what gifts Voltore brought. Mosca responds that Voltore brought a large, antique **gold** platter with Volpone's name inscribed on it. Volpone is very pleased by this, and he compares himself to a fox in Aesop's *Fables* who tricks a crow into dropping its cheese. Mosca laughs, and explains that he finds it funny that Voltore is outside thinking the plate might be the last gift he ever gives to Volpone, that it might convince Volpone to name Voltore as his heir, and that Volpone might die that very day and grant Voltore a vast fortune. In this fantasy, Mosca says, Voltore believes he'll be waited on and be called a great and well-studied lawyer, since wealth implies education. If you put a doctoral hood on a donkey, Mosca claims, people will believe the donkey is a Doctor of Divinity.

Volpone's obsession with material possessions and with gold has already been established, so it makes sense that he immediately wants to know what Voltore has brought. Mosca's fantasy of what Voltore expects will come with inheritance suggests that gold carries with it the appearance of certain unrelated qualities like education. This is contrasted to Volpone's previous claim that gold actually gives people qualities (like honor) rather than just changing the qualities a person appears to have.

Mosca helps Volpone complete his disguise by applying ointment to Volpone's eyes. Before leaving to bring in Voltore, Mosca tells Volpone that he hopes Volpone lives for years in order to keep deluding all the suitors and gaining wealth. Once Mosca exits, Volpone lies down and calls out all the **diseases** he has been faking for three years, all the while leading the suitors into believing that he is dying and that they will be named heir. He hears Voltore is about to enter, and he begins pretending to cough.

Mosca and Volpone are like actors applying stage makeup. Mosca's desire for Volpone to live a long life so that he can keep conning the suitors indicates Mosca's growing greed, which will eventually bring about Volpone's downfall. Though Volpone is exceedingly rich, and has grown even more rich with his ruse, he and Mosca still desire more; this is not just for the money, but for the pleasure of carrying out the theatrical deception.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Carrying the **gold** platter and ushered by Mosca, Voltore enters the room where Volpone is lying in bed pretending to be rife with **disease**. Mosca whispers that only Voltore, above all the rest, possesses Volpone's love, and that it's wise for Voltore to continue visiting and bringing gifts to cultivate that love. Mosca then turns to Volpone and loudly announces that Voltore has come. Volpone quietly asks Mosca to repeat himself, and Mosca says again that Voltore has come to visit. Volpone thanks Voltore for visiting, and Mosca explains that Voltore has brought a gold plate. Volpone tells Voltore to come more often.

Mosca and Volpone enjoy the same sense of dramatic irony felt by the audience: they know that Volpone is pretending to be ill and Voltore doesn't. Of course, this also draws attention to the fact that everything the audience sees here is a theatrical stage production, no more real than Volpone's cough. By pretending to be deaf, Volpone heightens the drama of the scene, since Voltore feels comfortable saying things that he would never usually express within earshot of Volpone.

Since Volpone is speaking to Mosca so quietly, Voltore has a difficult time hearing him. Mosca repeats to Voltore that Volpone is glad he has come and wishes that he would visit more often. Volpone blindly reaches out to touch Voltore's hand, and he asks to hold the **gold** plate, since he can't see well. Voltore gives Volpone the platter and says he's sorry to see Volpone is so weak. In an aside, Mosca says that Voltore is actually sorry to see that Voltore isn't weaker.

Pretending to be blind has the same effect of pretending to be deaf: it heightens the potential for dramatic irony since it makes Voltore inappropriately comfortable around Volpone. Despite this level of comfort, Voltore tries to maintain the appearance of genuinely caring about Volpone's wellbeing, rather than the reality of caring only about his wealth. At the same time, Mosca is able to see through Voltore, and Mosca's comic aside cuts through any attempt by Voltore to cultivate a sense of dramatic irony of his own.

Volpone tells Voltore that he is too kind, and Voltore responds that he wishes he could give health to Volpone as easily as he can give material gifts. Volpone says he understands that Voltore gives what he can, and he asks Voltore to continue visiting often. Voltore agrees, and Mosca reassures Voltore again that he is Volpone's heir. Volpone then cries out and pretends to faint.

Though Voltore's remark about it being easier to give wealth than health is disingenuous, it points to one of the aspects about money that makes it so dangerous and corrupting. It's easier, physically, intellectually, and emotionally to give someone money than it is to give them care, attention, love, or any sort of non-material gift.

Mosca uses Volpone's false fainting to usher Voltore out. Voltore wants to know if he is officially, legally named as Volpone's heir, but Mosca obfuscates and asks Voltore to employ him after Volpone dies. Mosca says that is working for Voltore, only serving Volpone to watch over the wealth that Voltore will soon inherit. Voltore asks if he is the sole heir, and Mosca confirms that he is, saying that the ink is not yet dry on the will.

As a lawyer, Voltore wants to see the legal document naming him heir, but Mosca is so quick on his feet and skilled at speaking and acting that he is able to avoid showing any proof (since, of course, there isn't any). This is another demonstration of the power of language, though one that shows the manipulative potential of words.

Voltore is thrilled to hear he is the heir, and he asks Mosca why he has been chosen. Mosca says it's simply because Voltore deserves it, and he goes on to say that Volpone likes Voltore and admires lawyers in general for their ability to speak so well about anything and argue at a moment's notice either side of a case. Mosca says Volpone wants an heir with a lawyer's spirit and masterful use of language.

While Mosca's praise of Voltore here is not genuine, it does accurately reflect the skills that Volpone values in himself and in Mosca: the masterful ability to use language to fit any demand and to argue and manipulate effectively. This emphasis on language as deceptive, though, contrasts to the opening of the play, in which Ben Jonson seemed to earnestly celebrate his own facility with words.

Just as Mosca finishes flattering Voltore, someone else knocks outside. Mosca tells Voltore that he doesn't want whoever is knocking to see Voltore, and Mosca ushers Voltore out. Mosca also reminds Voltore that he wants to be hired after Volpone dies. As soon as Voltore exits, Volpone springs out of bed and praises Mosca for his skills. Mosca, though, tells Volpone that Corbaccio is coming, so Volpone needs to resume his ruse. Volpone says that the vulture (Voltore) has gone and the old raven (Corbaccio) has come.

Part of what makes Mosca convincing is flattery, and part of his flattery of Voltore involves establishing a contrast between himself and Voltore. Though Mosca isn't bothered by being thought of as a parasite, it's only when Mosca reinforces the sense that he is a parasite by asking for employment after Volpone's death that it becomes clear how unfit the term "parasite" is for Mosca—he is actually the one conceiving and executing the ruses by which Volpone gets his money.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

Mosca puts away the **gold** platter brought by Voltore and tells Volpone to pretend he is asleep. He then instructs the money to "multiply." Mosca describes Corbaccio as an old man who is **sicker** than Volpone even pretends to be, but who hopes to "hop over his grave."

When Mosca tells the money to multiply, he means he wants to fortune to grow, but he also personifies money by asking it to multiply as in reproduce like a living being. By 'hopping over his grave,' Corbaccio hopes to skirt death and outlive Volpone.

Corbaccio enters the room, and Mosca greets him. Corbaccio then asks how Volpone is doing, and when Mosca says Volpone is doing worse, Corbaccio responds by saying it's good. Mosca informs Corbaccio that Volpone doesn't sleep well, and Corbaccio says "Good!" and says he has brought **medicine** from his own doctor.

Corbaccio's utter disregard for Volpone's life and his overt glee upon hearing of Volpone's illness is a strong example of how desire for money can overrule morality and common decency.

Volpone though, according to Mosca, is not interested in **medicine**. Corbaccio becomes defensive, saying that he oversaw the doctor making the medicine, which he promises will only make Volpone sleep. In an aside, Volpone jokes that it would make his "last sleep" if he were to take it.

Volpone knows that Corbaccio wishes he were dead, which is why he jokes that any medicine from Corbaccio would make him take his "last sleep" (i.e. die).

Mosca responds to Corbaccio's offer by saying that Volpone has no faith in **medicine**. Mosca reports that Volpone thinks doctors are even more dangerous than the diseases they treat, and he has apparently often said that Corbaccio's doctor will never be his heir. Corbaccio thinks Mosca has said that he won't be the heir, but Mosca corrects Corbaccio saying it's Corbaccio's *doctor* who won't be.

Mosca's remarks about medicine are part of Volpone's ruse, but they also convey legitimate fears and uncertainty surrounding doctors. Medicine was not exactly trustworthy at the time, and disease was very poorly understood.

Elaborating on Volpone's distrust of physicians, Mosca tells Corbaccio that doctors cut people open and experiment on dead men. They are not punished for this gruesome practice, but instead are rewarded. Corbaccio says that doctors kill "with as much license as a judge," but Mosca says that doctors kill more freely; while a judge only kills those who have broken the law, a doctor can kill even a judge.

In a way, doctors did cut people open and experiment on dead men by performing autopsies to learn about bodies and medicine. Despite the benefits of performing autopsies, this gave doctors a bad reputation. Corbaccio's true opinions are difficult to gauge, as he has just said he believed in medicine and might only be changing his stance to side with Mosca and increase his chances at Volpone's fortune. However, since his medicine might have been poison, it's possible that he believed this about doctors all along.

Corbaccio agrees that a doctor can kill anyone, then he changes the subject back to Volpone's health. Corbaccio asks about Volpone's apoplexy, which Mosca says is "violent;" he says Volpone struggles to speak, his eyes are sunken, and his face looks long. Corbaccio at first mishears long as "strong" and becomes worried that Volpone might recover, but Mosca tells him that he said "long," and Corbaccio is relieved. Mosca continues to list symptoms of Volpone's **disease**: his mouth gapes, his eyelids hang, his joints are stiff, his flesh is grey, his pulse is slow, and there is a cold sweat and fluid continuously coming from his brain out the corner of his eyes. During this extensive list of symptoms, Corbaccio constantly interjects with his approval.

Comically, Corbaccio only seems concerned about Volpone when he worries that Volpone might actually be healthy. The list of Volpone's supposed symptoms that Mosca gives to comfort Corbaccio were all thought to be deadly, though Corbaccio approves of each one. This shows, once again, how Volpone's theatrical ruse is actually bringing out the truth of the suitors' personalities. By thinking that Volpone is too sick to understand what it happening, the suitors unwittingly reveal to him their corrupt natures. This mirrors the play itself , which uses theater to comment on the corruption brought forth by greed.

After Mosca finishes reciting Volpone's symptoms, Corbaccio wonders if it is possible that he is healthier than Volpone is. Corbaccio says that he now thinks he'll outlive Volpone, which makes him feel twenty years younger. He then asks Mosca if Volpone has made his will, to which Mosca responds "not yet." Corbaccio asks what Voltore the lawyer was doing at the house previously if Volpone has not yet made his will. Mosca says that Voltore heard Volpone was making a will—which Mosca claims to have urged for the benefit of Corbaccio—and so Voltore came by and gave Volpone a **gold** plate. When Corbaccio asks if Voltore is trying to become Volpone's heir, Mosca pretends not to know, but Corbaccio assumes that Voltore does want the inheritance.

Corbaccio is suspicious of all the other suitors, worried that they might win Volpone's favor. It makes sense that he would assume that others share his own motives, and he happens to be correct, though Mosca's genius with language and performance throws him off the scent. The magnitude of Corbaccio's moral corruption is made clear by his reaction—feeling twenty years younger—to hearing how old, sick, and decrepit Volpone is. Corbaccio, like the bird of prey to which his name alludes, is literally strengthened by the misfortune of others.

To prevent Voltore from being named heir, Corbaccio presents Mosca with a bag of chequins (**gold** coins). Mosca takes the bag and says that money is the true, sacred **medicine**, that drugs cannot compare to "this great elixir." Corbaccio responds in Latin with the adage that gold can be felt, if not drunk. They talk about potentially healing Volpone, at which point Corbaccio attempts to take his money back. Mosca, though, tells him not to take it back, saying that he'll advise Corbaccio on how to win the entire fortune. Mosca tells Corbaccio that the fortune Corbaccio's by destiny. He then claims that when Volpone recovers from this particularly bad fit of illness, he will convince Volpone to write the will by showing him the bag of gold left by Corbaccio.

In the alchemical tradition, elixir is a substance that makes a person live forever or changes metal into gold. Corbaccio's Latin adage refers to the fact that dissolved gold was sometimes drunk as medicine, though touching it would be just as good, since it was so prized. This relates to the question of whether gold can inherently give a person qualities like health or honor.The healing powers of gold were considered to be so strong that Corbaccio considers taking his money back, lest it have the unintended consequence of preventing Volpone's death.

After Corbaccio agrees to leave the bag of **gold**, Mosca encourages him to run home to name Volpone heir to Corbaccio's fortune. Corbaccio is confused, since he doesn't want to disinherit his son. Mosca says disinheriting his son will make the ruse seem all the more real; he explains that when Volpone finds out that Corbaccio has named him heir, he will undoubtedly name Corbaccio heir to his own fortune in return. After hearing this, Corbaccio says he had considered the idea before, and he agrees with Mosca that it is sure to work, especially since Corbaccio is so likely to outlive Volpone. Corbaccio says that by disinheriting his son to earn Volpone's fortune, he's really only increasing his son's inheritance.

Part of Mosca's brilliance is convincing others that what he wants them to do is their own idea. By disinheriting his son, Corbaccio violates the social order by which wealth is preserved and passed on. It could be argued that Corbaccio genuinely believes that he is ultimately just increasing his son's inheritance, especially since Corbaccio is so near to death himself, but it could also be argued that it is a greedy act, and that the violation of social mores is evidence that Corbaccio has been corrupted.

Mosca assures Corbaccio that he's on Corbaccio's side, and, as Corbaccio leaves, Mosca yells jokes at him, since Corbaccio is hard of hearing. While Mosca essentially says that he is swindling Corbaccio, Corbaccio says that he's certain to outlive Volpone and that he doesn't doubt Mosca at all.

An essential (and masterful) part of Mosca's performance in the ruse is to amuse himself and Volpone. Thus, at any opportunity he makes jokes about Corbaccio, who makes a point of saying he suspects nothing. The irony here is that Volpone was the one believed to be deaf, though Corbaccio is the one who cannot hear essential information.

Once Corbaccio is gone, Volpone jumps out of bed again and says he almost burst from laughter. Mosca tells him to contain his laughter, and Volpone praises Mosca for his excellent work in swindling Corbaccio. Modestly, Mosca says that he just does what he is told: he flatters the men, lies to them, and sends them away. Volpone then says "What a rare punishment is avarice to itself!" Volpone reflects on old age and the slow decline of the human body, then jokes about how Corbaccio wants to live longer and how he deceives himself in his attempt to deceive others about his age.

Volpone outlines the play's moral stance toward greed: excessive greed is corrupting, and it brings about its own punishment. This comment, as well as Volpone's comments about the declining body, are at Corbaccio's expense, but they contain hints of irony. While Volpone is not as old as Corbaccio, and while he is not really sick, he is still old and terrified of aging, disease, and death. In addition, Volpone's own greed will soon be its own punishment (which the audience knows, since Ben Jonson spelled it out at the beginning of the play).

At the end of Volpone's speech on age, someone else knocks. Mosca tells Volpone to go back to pretending to be **sick**, since Corvino (the merchant) has come. Volpone says he'll play dead, and Mosca helps him apply more eye ointment before allowing Corvino to enter.

Volpone and Mosca go in and out of their ruse characters seamlessly. The eye ointment is just like the stage makeup that both actors are already wearing, adding an element of meta-theatricality to the play.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

Corvino enters as Mosca attends to Volpone, who is pretending to be deathly **ill**. Mosca greets Corvino, and he says that Volpone is as good as dead and that he recognizes no one. Corvino says that he brought Volpone a pearl, at which point Mosca says Volpone might be just aware enough to recognize Corvino. Mosca inquires about the quality of the pearl, when Volpone whispers Corvino's name. Corvino steps forward and hands Volpone the pearl, which he says is 24 carats (very large).

Mosca and Volpone essentially act out the same scene for the third time with slight modifications to maintain the ruse that Volpone is sick and to convince Corvino that he will be the heir. It's a telling bit of comedy that even though Volpone pretends not to recognize people, he can still discern the value of the pearl.

After Corvino gives Volpone the pearl, Mosca says that Volpone can't understand them, since his **disease** has caused him to lose his hearing. Mosca says that, despite being deaf, it comforts Volpone to see Corvino, and Corvino presents Volpone with a diamond, which Volpone immediately grabs onto. Corvino calls the sight pitiful, but Mosca says that "the weeping of an heir should still be laughter under a visor." Corvino asks if he is really the heir, and Mosca says that he is not able to show the will, but Mosca explains that he took advantage of the fact that Volpone was saying "Corvino" out loud over and over again. Though many others have come to try to be named heir, Mosca asked "who should be heir" and Volpone in his delirium said "Corvino," so Mosca inscribed Corvino as the heir.

Mosca's line about the weeping of an heir references all of the suitors. Though they might pretend to be concerned for Volpone, Mosca suggests that internally they should be celebrating ("laughing" at) Volpone's disease because it means that the suitors are closer to their presumed inheritance. It's notable that even though Mosca describes manipulating Volpone's words to create a will that favors Corvino, Corvino doesn't consider that Mosca might he using his skills at deception and manipulation in Volpone's service, rather than Corvino's.

Upon hearing Mosca's trick, Corvino hugs him and asks if Volpone really is not aware of them. After Mosca assures Corvino that Volpone is blind and knows no name or face (or anything), Corvino asks if Volpone has children. Mosca responds that he has fathered some bastards (Nano, Androgyno, and Castrone) by several mothers, but none of these children have been named heir.

Mosca's assertion that Nano, Androgyno, and Castrone are Volpone's bastards isn't mentioned elsewhere in the play and seems made up. Traditionally, children out of wedlock would not have received inheritances, as Mosca suggests.

Corvino asks again if Mosca is sure that Volpone cannot hear them, so Mosca shouts in Volpone's ear that he hopes Volpone's **disease** gets worse and kills him soon. The two begin screaming insults at Volpone about how terrible he looks and the gruesome symptoms of his illness. Mosca suggests that he could put Volpone out of his misery, but Corvino instructs him not to use violence. Corvino decides to leave and tries to take back his treasures, but Mosca reminds him that it doesn't matter since they're all going to be his anyway, and so Corvino leaves them.

Mosca's offer to cross an extreme moral boundary by killing Volpone for Corvino is risky; if Corvino consented to it, then it might have put an end to the ruse. But for whatever reason, killing Volpone is a line that the characters do not cross. They hope and even pray for his death, but they are not so corrupted by their greed as to be willing to take his life.

Mosca says that he is Corvino's creature, and that he owes his very being to Corvino. Corvino calls Mosca his friend, and says that he'll share in all of his fortunes. Mosca amends this by saying "except one," by which he means Corvino's wife. Corvino then leaves without responding.

Mosca substitutes money and employment for God, who would typically be credited for creating a person's existence, continuing the pattern of blasphemy and adding to the religious association with the characters' obsessions with money and wealth.

Volpone leaps up again and tells Mosca that he has outdone himself. Someone else knocks, but Volpone doesn't want to be bothered with any more suitors. He asks Mosca to prepare entertainment, saying that he wants pleasure and light. Mosca exits briefly, and Volpone admires the profits from the morning's exploits. Mosca returns and explains that the person knocking was a messenger from Lady Would-be, the wife to the English knight Sir Politic Would-be. She has asked how Volpone slept and wants to visit him. Volpone responds that he'll see her in three hours, and Mosca says that he told the messenger exactly that.

Volpone's sudden excitement juxtaposed with his false disease reinforces the theatrical nature of their ruse. Mosca is the perfect parasite, anticipating exactly Volpone's desires and needs. Volpone prepares to indulge his ultimate desire and vice: pleasure. Apparently, Lady-Would be is also a suitor for the inheritance, though not as prominent as Voltore, Corbaccio, or Corvino.

Volpone says he'll meet Lady Would-be after he is drunk, and then he'll wonder at the bravery of English men who give their wives so much freedom. Mosca says that Sir Politic is smart enough to know that his wife, however strange, doesn't have the face to be unfaithful. But if she had a face like Corvino's wife, he begins, and Volpone interrupts to ask if Corvino's wife is beautiful. Mosca responds by saying that she is wonder, "the blazing star of Italy … a beauty as ripe as harvest, whose skin is whiter than swan all over … a soft lip … flesh that melteth in the touch of blood." He even says she is as bright and lovely as Volpone's **gold**.

Volpone's comment about Lady Would-be is the first in the play's examination of different societal roles and restrictions for women in Italy and England. Mosca makes explicit the comparison between Lady Would-be and Celia (Corvino's wife), which will be continued throughout the play. Mosca's praise of Celia is in the love poetry form of blazon, *in which the poet focuses on different body parts of the subject ("skin," "lip," "flesh"). Characteristic of the blazon is paired imagery of red and white, seen here with white skin and red blood.*

Volpone asks how he didn't know about this beauty before, and Mosca explains that he only discovered it yesterday. Volpone says that he hopes to see her, but Mosca explains it's impossible, since she's guarded, she never goes outside, she only gets fresh air from a window, and she's spied on by all the members of Corvino's household. Volpone decides he'll try to see her at her window in disguise, since he also needs to keep people thinking that he's about to die.

Volpone and Mosca plan yet another theatrical ruse with new costumes (disguises). Volpone's avariciousness here begins to transition from greed for material wealth to excessive lust for pleasure, both physical/sexual and mental (the pleasure he receives from fooling and deceiving others).

ACT 2, SCENE 1

The English knight Sir Politic Would-Be and Peregrine, another Englishman, enter St Mark's Place, a public square outside of Corvino's house. Sir Politic says that to a wise man the whole world is a native land; he will not be bound to any single country (or to Europe) if fate calls him to travel. He claims that he doesn't have an excessive desire to see different countries and different religions, and he says that his desire to travel isn't from any dislike of his native country. Instead, he travels because he has the desire to learn about different people, just as did Ulysses, the archetypical wise traveler. Sir Politic explains that it was his wife who wanted to go to Venice to learn Italian and see the culture. He then asks Peregrine if he is carrying a passport.

Sir Politic and Peregrine make up the play's side plot, for which Jonson faced criticism; some critics said that this secondary plot was not interwoven well enough into the main plot. The two Englishmen are travelers, who at the time were thought to be susceptible to corruption, especially from visiting places like Venice. Travel guides and travel literature were very popular at the time, most of which would have urged Englishmen to be careful in Italy. Sir Politic shows that his wife has some say in the marriage, as it was her desire to visit Venice.

Peregrine says that he does have a passport, and Politic asks him how long he has been away from England. Peregrine has been gone seven weeks, and Sir Politic says that he has heard strange news about the homeland and wants Peregrine to confirm (or deny) it. Sir Politic says he heard that a raven built a royal ship for the King. In an aside, Peregrine says he can't tell if Sir Politic is playing a trick or if Sir Politic has been tricked.

Sir Politic shows early on in the interaction that he is extremely gullible, willing to believe anything as fact even if it appears preposterous. Peregrine's aside about tricks lays the groundwork for his interactions with Sir Politic to follow; the two men several times misunderstand one another and believe a trick has been played.

Peregrine asks Sir Politic his name and jokes, in an aside, that it's fitting. Sir Politic tells Peregrine that he's a "poor knight," and Peregrine is a little confused that the "fine Lady Would-be" wanted to go to Venice for information on fashion and behavior, since Venice is well known for having elegant prostitutes. Sir Politic says proverbially, "the spider and the bee oftimes suck from one flower."

Sir Politic Would-be's name is fitting, because Politic means worldly-wise, and Sir Politic wishes so badly that he were worldly or wise. A "poor knight" is someone who bought a knighthood at a time that the English throne sold off knighthoods to raise money. The proverb seems to suggest that one thing (or place) can serve multiple purposes at once.

Peregrine then tells Sir Politic that what he heard about the raven is true. Peregrine also says that the lioness kept in the Tower of London gave birth to another cub. Sir Politic is astounded by these strange events, as well as the reports of an aurora, of a new star, and of meteors. Sir Politic considers them all omens. He asks if it's true that three porpoises were seen upstream of the London bridge, and Peregrine says that, in fact, six were found, as well as a sturgeon. Sir Politic is continually astounded, and he wonders what all of these strange occurrences might signal.

Peregrine informs Sir Politic of false news in order to make fun of him, though some of his remarkable claims are true: the story about lions giving birth is true, as is the reference to a new star, which was a supernova discovered by Kepler. All of this news (true and false) seems to Sir Politic an omen that something terrible is going to happen. He's apparently gullible and *superstitious. It's also notable that Peregrine's suspicion that Sir Politic was tricking him led him to trick Sir Politic—deception begets deception here, as we have been seeing with Volpone and Mosca.*

Peregrine tells Sir Politic that the day he left England a whale was discovered in Woolwich. Sir Politic first wonders whether it's truly possible, but he then says he believes it, and that he thinks the whale was sent by Spain to interfere with English ships. In other news, Peregrine reports that Stone the fool has died. In response to this news, Sir Politic accidentally makes a pun on the phrase 'stone dead.' Peregrine then says, in an aside, that if Sir Politic were well known, he'd become a common character on the English stage. Peregrine also says that whoever wrote a character like Sir Politic would probably be accused of being absurd.

Sir Politic completely misses the pun he has inadvertently made, showing he lacks the language skills that are so valued in this play. Peregrine, meanwhile, meta-theatrically notes that Sir Politic seems like someone that belongs in a play. Sir Politic is an absurd character, which the play itself recognizes here.

Sir Politic continues reacting in shock to the news of Stone's death, claiming that he knew Stone to be one of the most dangerous people in England, since he was only a fool to cover up his secret activities as a spy. According to Sir Politic, Stone received weekly intelligence reports in cabbages, then dispensed the information out in other fruits and produce. Sir Politic claims to have seen Stone taking information from a traveler in a tavern by exchanging notes through a plate of meat and a toothpick (the meat, he explains, was cut into the shapes of letters in a code). Peregrine responds that he heard Stone could not read, but Sir Politic says this was just a rumor spread to preserve Stone's cover.

Sir Politic's ideas about Stone's espionage are absurd, since Stone was illiterate, and since the means of communication he outlines are ridiculous. The accusation Sir Politic makes about Stone is one of the play's only explorations of political corruption, which Venice was known for alongside moral corruption. The idea that Stone only used being a fool as a cover for his espionage contrasts with Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno, who all love being fools.

Peregrine says that he heard that baboons from China were also used as spies, and Sir Politic instantly agrees, recognizing these baboon spies as what he calls Mamaluchi. The baboons, according to Sir Politic, were involved in some French plots but were eventually discovered. Sir Politic notes that he has learned from one of these baboons that the situation has been rectified and that the baboon spies are now ready for more employment. Peregrine jokes that Sir Politic will not admit to being ignorant of anything.

Peregrine increases the absurdity of his claims to see how far Sir Politic will go, which is amusing to Peregrine and to the audience. Like Volpone pretending to be deaf (which allows the suitors to reveal their cruelty), Peregrine drawing out Sir Politic's ignorance is akin to dramatic irony; the audience knows what's going on but Sir Politic (and the suitors) don't.

Sir Politic claims not to know everything, but he says that he has general knowledge and loves to note and observe. He marks trends for his own use and he knows information about government affairs. Peregrine responds that he believes himself very lucky to have met Sir Politic, since Sir Politic is so knowledgeable. Peregrine then asks Sir Politic to help him learn how to behave in Venice. Sir Politic asks if Peregrine has left England without knowing the proper rules for travel, and Peregrine responds that he got common tips from his Italian language book. Sir Politic says that Peregrine shouldn't trust the book, and he begins bragging about his involvement with noble families, when Peregrine cuts him off to say that someone else is entering the square.

Sir Politic's claim of being knowledgeable is amusing to Peregrine and to the audience because Peregrine has spent so much time drawing out just how little Sir Politic actually knows. Peregrine's comment that he's lucky to have met Sir Politic and his request that Sir Politic instruct him on proper behavior have the same sense of dramatic irony, since audiences know Peregrine only feels lucky because Sir Politic is so amusing and easy to make fun of. In bragging about noble families, Sir Politic continues revealing his sense of self-importance, since Peregrine and audiences know that Sir Politic is a "poor knight" (he's barely a noble).

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Mosca and Nano, both in disguises, enter the square outside Corvino's home where Sir Politic and Peregrine have been talking. Mosca points to a window, and he and Nano begin setting up a platform. Sir Politic asks Peregrine if he has heard about the Italian mountebanks (swindling salesmen and fraudsters), since they are about to see one. Peregrine says he has heard that they are conmen who make a living selling oils and **medicine**. Sir Politic responds that mountebanks are "the only knowing men of Europe!" He calls them great scholars, doctors, and best speakers in the world.

Mosca and Nano's costumes demonstrate the theatricality of Mosca's ruses, and they create dramatic irony, since audiences know that the two men are in disguise, but Sir Politic and Peregrine do not. At the same time, the disguises remind the audience that every character on stage is really just an actor in a costume. Note also that the mountebanks are praised for their ability to speak well, which in turn allows them to sell well, tying language to commerce.

Peregrine says that he has heard mountebanks are all talk and no substance and that they lie about their bad **medicines**, which they'll eventually sell for extremely cheap despite a very high starting price. Sir Politic says that Peregrine will have to see for himself, and he asks Mosca who the mountebank is. Mosca says it's Scoto of Mantua, at which point Sir Politic promises Peregrine that his opinions about mountebanks are about to change, though he wonders why Scoto of Mantua would mount his stage in the square when he usually does so in the Piazza.

Peregrine knows that mountebanks (like the play's other tricksters) use deceptive, empty language as a powerful tool to manipulate others. The mountebank about to appear, of course, is Volpone, not Scoto of Mantua, and he is stationed outside of Corvino's house instead of in the Piazza because he wants to sleep with Corvino's wife.

Volpone enters the square dressed as a mountebank and followed by a crowd of people. Sir Politic and Peregrine watch as Volpone mounts the stage and launches into a speech, explaining that the crowd might find it strange that he has chosen to set up here instead of in the Piazza after being gone from Venice for eight months. He explains that he is not desperate to sell his goods at a cheap price, and that the rumor that he was imprisoned (spread by a competing mountebank) is false. He says he cannot stand the salesmen who are too poor to afford a stage and tell wild fabricated tales about adventures that never happened. Throughout the speech, Sir Politic makes little interruptions to Peregrine about how good it is.

This performance is almost directly opposite to Volpone's performed disease—here, he is an energetic and bombastic salesman. Part of his sales pitch is disparaging other mountebanks for being poor and assuring the crowd that he is not desperate to sell his goods; he seems to imply that one needs to have money to make money, which is related to the claim throughout the play that money itself imbues people with good qualities. Sir Politic, meanwhile, is struck by Volpone's language abilities, which are obliquely made parallel to Ben Jonson's, since (like Jonson did of other playwrights in the opening), Volpone disparages competing mountebanks.

Volpone continues, saying that the other mountebanks are terrible, and that they'll kill twenty people a week as if it were a play. Even so, he says, these terrible mountebanks have some favor with the public, though all their **medicine** does is purge people into the other world (i.e. kills them). He then says that his bank will only be the source of profit and delight, and that he has nothing (or very little) to sell.

Volpone's comment that doctors kill people like they are in plays is meta-theatrical, since Volpone himself is a character in the play. His comments also reflect the very real contemporary fear that medicine could not be trusted and that doctors were just as dangerous as disease. It's comical to see Volpone claiming not to care about profit—the audience knows that money is nearly all he cares about, though in this literal moment his statement might be true, since he is trying only to seduce Celia.

Volpone next claims that he and his six servants can't make the elixir fast enough for all the Venetians who want to buy it, including merchants and senators. He asks what use a rich man has with a full wine cellar when the doctor tells him to drink only **medicine** on pain of death. He cries out to health and calls it the blessing of the rich, and he says that no one can enjoy the world unless they are healthy. Since health is so important, he reasons, the people should not be cheap when it comes to his product.

The line about a rich man having a cellar full of wine while being required to drink only medicine recalls (and inverts) Volpone's criticism, earlier in the play, of those who don't know how to properly spend money. Again, physical health is somehow associated with wealth. Ironically, in his other ruse, Volpone's pretending to be both rich and sick stands in opposition to the notion he keeps pushing that wealth maintains health.

Volpone says that when they become sick, they can try to apply **gold** to the affected areas and see what happens—it's only his "rare extraction" that has the power to cure a vast list of mild and severe ailments. His elixir, he says, is the doctor and is the **medicine**. It cures. It is both theoretical and practical in the medicinal arts. It costs eight crowns. Volpone then instructs Nano to sing a verse in honor of the elixir.

Backtracking from his claim that health is the blessing of the rich (and from discussions about gold as medicine earlier in the play), Volpone seems to reverse his position by saying that gold cannot *be used as medicine. Rather, he says, his elixir is the only true, trustworthy medicine.*

Sir Politic asks Peregrine what he thinks of Volpone and his language, to which Peregrine responds he hasn't heard anything like it other than in **alchemy** or dense scriptural treatises. Nano then sings in praise of the elixir. He sings that if the ancient Greek doctors Hippocrates or Galen had known the secret of the elixir, they would have spent far less time working, and no other bad **medicines** would have been tried or invented. At the end of the song, Peregrine says eight crowns is too expensive for the elixir.

Volpone's language here is apparently so unique (and confusing) that it sounds like an obscure alchemical text or a difficult theological essay. Sir Politic, who won't admit to being ignorant of anything, thinks the language is impeccable, but Peregrine seems to find it absurd and almost without meaning. Peregrine is one of the only characters who seems able to identify and resist deceptive language.

Volpone begins another dense, ostentatious rant, saying that if he had time he could list the numerous miraculous effects of his product, list the many people it has cured, and list all of the **diseases** it fixes. He claims he has been endorsed by the college of physicians because of the quality of his medicine and because of the secrets he knows. He then says that some might say there are other mountebanks who claim to have the same product he has; Volpone agrees that many of them have imitations made at greater cost in complex processes that ultimately fail. He says he pities their foolishness more than their loss of money and time, since you can earn back money, but "to be a fool born is disease incurable."

Volpone's list of diseases is absurd, and it shows the character's obsession with illness. Between his three years pretending to be ill and his long list of diseases to fear, there is evidence that Volpone is afraid his fake diseases will turn real. In a strange way, Volpone's pity for those who are born fools is aligned with the play's moral message. Money is impermanent; it is not *the most important thing in life. You can always make or lose money, but loss of morals, or reputation, or of character can be permanent.*

Volpone says that from his youth he has sought out the rarest secrets and spared no cost in learning everything that he could. He claims to be a master of the chemical arts, since, while others have been at Venetian balls, he has been studying. Having studied so much, he has arrived at a point of success and prominent reputation. He goes on to say that while he never previously valued the elixir at less than eight crowns, he's willing to sell it for six. He tells the crowd that he isn't asking for the true value of the elixir – some have offered a thousand crowns for it – but he despises money. He is rejecting those offers in order to sell it to the people gathered in the crowd.

All of this, of course, is fiction, and it's comical to hear Volpone claim that he despises money. The absurdity of this scene can be seen as a commentary on or criticism of the corrupting force of commerce in Venice, as mountebanks essentially just take advantage of eager consumers with elaborate exaggerations, lies, and faulty products.

Peregrine comments on what a waste of time it is to start at such a high price for what will ultimately sell for very cheap. Nano then sings another song encouraging the crowd to purchase the elixir, naming several ailments it will fix. Volpone says he is in a good mood and will therefore lower the price in an act of charity. He says he'll sell it for sixpence, though he will not lower the price again by even a single coin. He tells the crowd to toss handkerchiefs if they want to buy the elixir, and he promises a special additional gift to whomever first throws a handkerchief.

Peregrine has no idea just how much time is being wasted, since Volpone isn't really selling anything. It's also a somewhat damning commentary on the theatre that Nano is singing and entertaining in order to sell a bogus product. In a way, Ben Jonson is entertaining the audience in order to teach them a moral lesson. Presumably he means well, but the parallel in technique is alarming.

Peregrine asks Sir Politic if he would be the first to throw a handkerchief, but from her window above, Celia, Corvino's wife, throws down a handkerchief. Volpone thanks her and says he'll give her something even better than his elixir – a powder that he says is too expensive to even describe. He says Apollo gave the powder to Venus to make her perpetually young, and that Venus gave it to Helen of Troy. The powder was lost for ages until it was recently rediscovered. Volpone says that he is the only one with access to this special powder, which has many beneficial effects, but he is cut off and the scene ends.

Volpone's improvised (or possibly rehearsed) invention of this second product shows his mastery of language, deception, and acting. The lineage of this invented powder is reminiscent of the lineage Androgyno gives of his soul's migration to him from Pythagoras—perhaps this is where Volpone got the idea for this trick.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Corvino enters the square outside his home where Volpone (in disguise) has been selling an elixir to a large crowd of people. Celia has just thrown down a handkerchief to Volpone. Corvino screams "spite of the devil" and chases away Volpone, Nano, and the crowd. Corvino compares the strange events to stock events from Italian dell'arte shows.

Corvino has no idea how correct he is when he compares the mountebank (which is really Volpone performing a mountebank) to an Italian dell'arte show, a professional theatre performance that used stock characters and stories. This is yet another example of the play's meta-theatricality.

Peregrine asks Sir Politic what he thought about what just happened, and Sir Politic thinks it might be some trick being played on him. He says that he needs to stand his guard, since for three weeks all of his letters have been intercepted. Peregrine says he'll continue to spend time with Sir Politic since he is so amusing.

Sir Politic is continually suspicious of being a victim of political corruption and espionage, believing that his mail has been intercepted. This is related to his inflated sense of self-importance—he's only tangentially involved with the events that he believes might be a trick on him.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

In Volpone's house, Volpone tells Mosca that he is wounded. Mosca asks what he means, and Volpone explains that he is wounded within, as he has been shot by cupid and is filled with desire for Celia. He says he can't live without Mosca's help. Mosca says he wishes that Volpone had never seen Celia, and Volpone wishes Mosca had never told him about her. Nonetheless, Mosca says he's bound in duty to do his best to help Volpone win Celia.

Volpone evokes the common trope in love poetry in which someone becomes mortally wounded by cupid's arrow, as if they cannot survive without their beloved. Though he has only just seen her, his lust for Celia already appears to be dangerous, inappropriate, and insatiable. This seems not much different from Volpone's ravenous greed for money.

Volpone wonders if he has any hope, and Mosca says that it is at least possible (even if unlikely). Volpone tells Mosca to use all of his resources, even "coin," to help Volpone, and Mosca says that if Volpone can cuckold Corvino, then the mountebank disguise will have been worth it. Volpone wonders if the crowd believed his mountebank disguise, and Mosca says that it was very convincing. Mosca then tells Volpone to leave him to his trickery.

Mosca constantly reassures Volpone that their ruses are convincing, possibly because Volpone fears that reality will show through his deceptions. Volpone's use of the word "coin" has a dual meaning, suggesting that Mosca should use Volpone's use coins, but also that Mosca should figuratively turn Volpone into money, another indication of Volpone's obsession with material wealth.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

Corvino, with a sword in his hand, drags Celia into a room of his house. He shouts that his honor has been lost, and he is furious that Celia interacted with such a foolish mountebank at a public window. He laments the mountebank's overacting and the terrible sales pitch for his elixir, shocked that Celia seemed to enjoy it. He asks if the mountebank was like a whistle used to train falcons, or if Celia was enamored by his ridiculous clothing. He accuses her of wanting to have sex with the mountebank, and says that if she does he'll leave her and retain her dowry. He calls her a whore and says that she gravely underestimated the way he would react. He says that for justice, her actions should be followed by the murder of her entire family.

Corvino's treatment of Celia is based on the stereotype that Italian men were controlling of their wives, but this depiction is extreme in its severity and its violence. Jonson's imagery of the mountebank as a falcon tamer was a common contemporary trope used to describe relationship dynamics: men had the authoritative "taming" position over women. Part of this authority was the ability to leave a marriage with the dowry if the woman was unfaithful. Corvino's call for the murder of Celia's family is an extreme overreaction, evidence that he is corrupted by his jealousy and his greed for money.

Celia tries to calm Corvino down, but she's unable to. He asks her what she could suggest as punishment for acting so dishonorably, and he threatens to stab her with his sword the same number of times she stabbed the mountebank with her lustful eyes. She says that she didn't think being at the window would upset him so much, but he is furious that she tried to have a conversation with a stranger in front of a crowd. He says that she purposely reached out with a handkerchief, which would probably generate a letter in response telling her where to meet for sex.

Again, the threats Corvino makes are excessive and extremely violent, and the juxtaposition of Celia's completely reasonable behavior makes them seem all the more absurd. The threat to stab her with his sword contains a connotation of sexual violence, which is bitterly ironic, considering that he is upset with her for an imagined sexual transgression.

Celia pleads that she never acts inappropriately and she says she only leaves the house infrequently to go to church. Corvino responds that now she'll be even more restricted, saying that his previous rules will seem like freedom compared to what he'll enforce now. He says the window will be blocked and she will be required to stand behind a line three yards away from it. If she crosses the line and gets too close to the window, even by accident, he'll rain down hell and horror on her. He then hands her a chastity belt and says he'll keep her in the back part of the house, and that everything about her will be backwards and without pleasure. He tells her that her "open" behavior forces him to act this way.

When Corvino references to the back part of house and uses the word "backwards," he is making puns on anal sex. This is, again, a horrible irony, since it's Corvino—not Ceila—who seems obsessed with sex, contrary to his accusations. Celia's desire to go to church is also juxtaposed with Corvino's promise to rain down hell if she disobeys. Celia's name means heaven, and she is aligned with heaven, religion, and moral righteousness in the play.

Corvino is interrupted by a knock, at which point he tells Celia to go away and hide herself in another part of the house away from windows. If she disobeys, he says, he'll dissect her publicly for anatomical research. Celia exits, and a servant enters saying that Mosca has come to visit.

In another gruesome threat, Corvino evokes the fear of doctors by saying that he'll perform a public dissection like doctors might perform autopsies.

ACT 2, SCENE 6

In Corvino's house Corvino greets Mosca and guesses that Volpone has died. Mosca says that the news is the contrary: Volpone is recovering. Corvino curses his bad luck and asks how it's possible, to which Mosca replies that Corbaccio and Voltore gave Volpone some of Scoto the mountebank's elixir. Corvino is furious at the news, and he says that if it wasn't for the law he'd kill the mountebank. He says there is no way that the elixir is really effective, since he knows the mountebank is a "common rogue" and an idiot. All the ingredients, he says, were terrible, and Corvino claims to be able to name the recipe in exact amounts.

In this moment, Volpone's two ruses come together (the performance of illness and pretending to be the mountebank) through Mosca's claim that the mountebank has cured Volpone of his fake illness. This is another example of the play's meta-theatricality, and it also adds to the cleverness of Mosca's lies. Corvino's statement that he would kill the mountebank if not for the law contextualizes his decision earlier in the play not to kill Volpone, suggesting it's a legal and not a moral obligation that keeps Corvino from killing.

Mosca says he doesn't know what happened, but that Voltore and Corbaccio poured some of the elixir into Volpone's ears and nostrils and brought him to health by massaging him with it. Mosca says that Voltore and Corbaccio have hired doctors to consult on the treatment of Volpone, and though the doctors disagreed at first on different methods to cure him, they ultimately decided that the best way to keep Volpone healthy is to find a young, lusty woman to sleep with him.

Part of the genius of Mosca's ruses is his ability to adapt to each person he is fooling. While before he claimed that Volpone didn't trust medicine, now Mosca has reversed his position. He now claims doctors have been hired, and he (and Volpone) take the prescription of those doctors to be gravely important and serious, even though the treatment sounds absurd.

Mosca says his unfortunate task is to find a woman for Volpone, and that he has come to Corvino for advice because he doesn't want to do anything that will come in the way of Corvino being named heir to Volpone's fortune. Mosca says he's in the delicate position of wanting to report to Corvino, but he knows that if he doesn't deliver a woman, it might make him look bad to Volpone and therefore prevent him from ensuring that Corvino is named the heir. He says the other two suitors are trying to find a woman for Volpone, and he encourages Corvino to stop them by doing so first.

When Mosca tells Corvino that he is trying to keep up appearances with Volpone, Mosca's meta-theatrical ruse is taken to another level. The audience knows that Mosca is pretending to work for Corvino, thereby drawing attention to the fact that Mosca is really just a character in a play. Now not only is he pretending to work for Corvino, but he says this fictional service involves acting like he is really working for Volpone, which is of course what he is actually doing.

Corvino at first suggests hiring a "common courtesan," but Mosca says that it's a bad idea, since they are so subtle and tricky and therefore might cheat everyone out of Volpone's fortune. Mosca says it needs to be a simple woman without tricks, someone who will obey. He tells Corvino to think, and says that one of the doctors even offered his daughter. Corvino is shocked, but Mosca says it's true, and that she's a virgin. The doctor, he says, knows the state of Volpone's body and what it needs. He also says that almost no one will know about the situation.

It's notable that Mosca appeals here to the authority of doctors, since doctors are soundly untrusted throughout the play. Even as Mosca gives the excuse of a doctor's order for needing Celia to sleep with Volpone, his very use of a false and absurd doctor's order as a tool for manipulation further underscores the fraught role of doctors in the text. Though Mosca believes that a doctor's word carries weight, he also thinks it believable that a doctor might prescribe his virginal daughter to an ailing man.

Corvino takes a moment to pace and talk to himself. He says to himself that there is no reason he shouldn't command his woman like the doctor did his daughter, since wives and daughters are both subdued by husbands and fathers. Corvino decides that he will prevent the doctor by offering his own wife to Volpone. Mosca says that he didn't want to say it, but that he thought about suggesting it as the best way for Corvino to assure he is named the heir, given the current situation. Mosca even says that after this, they'll be able to kill Volpone, but Corvino still resists this idea. Corvino tells Mosca to inform Volpone of his decision, and Mosca says he'll send for Corvino and Celia when the time is right.

Corvino sees offering a woman to sleep with Volpone, be it daughter or wife, as an act of control. Once he has begun to think of it this way, it makes sense that he agrees to it, because he's obsessed with asserting control over Celia however he can. Again, Corvino resists whenever Mosca suggests killing Volpone, showing that Corvino has not been utterly corrupted by his greed. He's willing to offer his own wife to Volpone sexually, but he still has a moral (or legal) obligation not to kill. It's also possible that he simply doesn't want Volpone to die before he has officially named Corvino heir.

ACT 2, SCENE 7

In his house, Corvino calls for Celia, who enters crying. He tells her to dry her tears, and says that he was only testing her before when he screamed at her. He says he isn't jealous, and never was. He's confident in her, and he tells her to go and get ready in her nicest clothes and best jewelry, since they are invited to a feast at Volpone's, where she'll see just how far from jealous he is.

Throughout the play, characters bounce between acts of deception and acts of legitimate corruption and greed, though sometimes the two are difficult to differentiate. In this example, Corvino claims to have been testing Celia by feigning jealousy, though it is clear that Corvino was honest then and he is deceiving her now.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

By himself in the street, Mosca says he's afraid he'll fall in love with himself and his talents, because his ruses are so successful. He feels whimsy in his blood, and wonders how success has made him feel this way, since he feels like he could jump out of his skin. He says parasites are sent from heaven, and he wonders why his craft is not an academic subject. Everything in the world, he says, is essentially a parasite or a sub-parasite. He doesn't mean homeless people or beggars, or people who make their living by only flattering others. Instead, he means those who (like him) can nimbly jump from role to role, be anywhere at once and work well in all conditions. Such a person has the "art born with him." He doesn't struggle to learn it, but he practices it and builds the skill from his excellent nature. These people are the true parasites, and the others are just clowns.

Mosca grows more and more confident and independent in the course of the play, and here he seems to be overtaken (corrupted) by his own sense of accomplishment and excellence. Mosca believes the world order is made up of people like him, all living off of one another, but for him parasitism isn't just about money. Instead, he (like Jonson in the opening) values those with theatrical skills and the ability to adapt seamlessly. The greatest parasite and greatest people, according to Mosca, are actors who are born with the art and language inside of them. It's an interesting declaration—does Jonson consider himself to be a parasite?

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Bonario walks into the street and Mosca recognizes him as Corbaccio's son. Bonario, though, isn't interested in talking with Mosca, since he thinks Mosca is contemptable and base. He says Mosca is base because his means of survival is flattery and laziness. Mosca acts hurt by Bonario's words and admits that Bonario is superior to him. However, he says that Bonario is wrong to judge him when he doesn't know him. Mosca begins to cry, and in an aside, Bonario takes the tears as a sign that Mosca is "soft and good." Bonario apologizes for being so harsh to Mosca.

Mosca recognizes that Bonario is not like his father or the other suitors, and that flattery alone – along with recognizing the class difference – will not be enough to manipulate Bonario. Instead, Mosca shows a new depth in his acting ability, pretending to be overcome with emotion and tears. Bonario takes Mosca's apparent softness and openness for weakness and honesty, but the audience knows that Mosca is just an especially skilled actor. This also draws attention to the fact that, even if the character of Mosca were truly sad, it would still just be an actor pretending.

Mosca says it's true that he needs to serve others in order to make a living since he wasn't born into a fortune, but he denies ever doing "base" or bad things for money. In an aside, Bonario remarks that Mosca's speech can't just be a "personated passion." He apologizes again for calling Mosca base, and he asks Mosca what his business is.

The obvious irony here is that nearly everything *that Mosca does is a bad thing done for money. Bonario is naïve in his belief that because Mosca seems to be sad and honest, he must truly that way. He thinks Mosca's passions are too deep and legitimate to be acted, which is comical, considering that the audience is watching a play.*

Mosca says that his business concerns Bonario, and though it might seem like he is doing a disservice to Volpone, he will still reveal a secret because he thinks it's the right thing to do. Mosca says that Corbaccio intends to disinherit Bonario as if he were a stranger. Bonario says that this story has lost Mosca some of his trust, since Bonario believes it is not possible that his father would act so unnaturally. Mosca says that Bonario's confidence in Corbaccio makes sense given Bonario's innocence, which makes the wrong even worse. Mosca then says he'll bring Bonario to a hiding place where he can witness Corbaccio disinheriting him. Mosca says if it isn't true, Bonario can draw his sword and kill Mosca.

It's unclear why Mosca tells Bonario about the plan for Corbaccio to disinherit him. They do not stand to profit from Bonario, and telling Bonario ultimately ruins everything. It's possible that (in the same way that Volpone later becomes corrupted), Mosca is corrupted by his love for himself, for whimsy, and for ruses. Given the monologue he delivers in Act 3 Scene 1, it makes sense that he might become so taken with these ruses that he tells Bonario just for the sake of adding complexity and proving that he can handle it.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

In Volpone's house, Volpone says to Nano, Androgyno, and Castrone that he thinks Mosca is taking too long. To pass the time, Volpone instructs the entertainers to perform. The entertainers debate which of them is most pleasing to Volpone, and Nano says that the dwarf (himself) is best, since he's little, pretty, funny, requires less food, and is the best fool. Someone knocks, and Volpone sends the entertainers out and prepares to pretend he is sick. Nano shouts to Volpone that the visitor is Lady Would-be, to which Volpone responds that she is so tormenting that he's worried she will make him stop desiring Celia.

The performers, like Mosca, all seem to relish their roles as parasites, actors, and fools. Considering the deceptive nature of the other performances in the play, though, the fools' entertainment takes on a slightly sinister association. Volpone makes the comparison between Lady Would-be and Celia, apparently favoring the silent, obedient Italian woman to the talkative, more independent English woman.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Lady Would-be and Nano enter the room where Volpone lies pretending to be sick. Lady Would-Be tells Nano to inform Volpone that she has arrived, and she calls for one of her waiting women to come and fix her clothing and makeup. In an aside, Volpone says he feels a fever coming on. The two serving women fix Lady Would-be's makeup and clothing while she chides them for doing it wrong, despite the fact that she has told them what to do so many times before.

While Volpone is pretending to be sick, Lady Would-be applies makeup, another way of manipulating appearances to conceal reality. At the time, a woman's modesty was shown through blushing, and makeup was seen as obscuring that modesty. Volpone meanwhile, is worried that interacting with Lady Would-be will make his fake disease real.

Lady Would-be continues scolding her servants, saying that she doesn't want the Italians to see her and say that the English lady can't dress herself. She then instructs Nano to entertain the servants, and she goes towards Volpone, at which point he says in an aside, "the storm comes toward me."

Part of what concerns Lady Would-be is her public appearance and her reputation, much like Sir Politic tries hard to seem knowledgeable and wise. Volpone calls Lady Would-be a storm because she talks so much.

Lady Would-be asks Volpone how he has slept, and he responds that he can't sleep because he dreamed of a strange fury entering the home. Lady Would-be begins recounting a dream of her own, and in an aside Volpone curses himself for giving her a topic to start talking about. He asks her to stop talking, since he suffers at the mention of any dream, but she takes him to mean he has heartburn and begins listing potential treatments for it.

Volpone isn't talking about a dream, he's talking about Lady Would-be, but she doesn't get it. Lady Would-be can apparently talk about anything; every time Volpone changes the subject she is instantly able to start talking about the new topic. It's a facility with language somewhat reminiscent of Mosca's, but, since her ability lacks self-awareness, it is not valued in the play.

Volpone asks Lady Would-be to drink and leave, but that only starts her talking about a drink recipe. Volpone says in an aside that before he pretended to have **diseases**, but now he really has one. She continues trying to cure him, and when he asks her to stop making prescriptions, she says she studied some medicine and begins talking about music and philosophy. She says she thinks women should learn to read and have artistic skills, though she believes harmony in a woman's face, voice, and clothing is most important.

Volpone's concern about becoming sick for real is partially a joke at Lady Would-be's expense, suggesting she is so annoying it will make him sick, but it also seems to reflect a genuine fear of illness and a worry that, by appearing sick, he will really contract disease. Lady Would-be seems much more educated than the typical renaissance woman, having studied medicine, music, and philosophy. She believes women should be educated, which was a progressive viewpoint, but she also believes that a woman's external appearance is more important than her education, which is stereotypical and fitting with contemporary societal norms.

Volpone responds by saying that an old poet wrote that the best quality of women is silence, but Lady Would-be only responds by asking which poet he means and naming a long list of poets she has read. In an aside, he says that nothing can escape her "eternal tongue." He decides to simply say nothing to her, and she starts talking about English, Italian, and French writers. When she realizes he is not paying attention, she asks Volpone if he is okay, to which he responds that his mind is disturbed. She says the best way to fix a disturbed mind is to practice philosophy, and she starts talking again. She describes an old acquaintance who would lie still for hours on end listening to her sleep, at which point Volpone cries out for someone to rescue him.

The ideal renaissance woman was chaste, obedient, and, as Volpone references, silent. In this context, the play's mockery of Lady Would-be's ability to improvise and speak about anything seems gendered—for male characters, this skill is valued. Much of the dialogue in this scene comes from an ancient Greek source called "On Talkative Women," suggesting that Jonson might have believed that there was some truth to the stereotype that women talk excessively, or more generously, that Jonson is engaging with the literary tradition of depicting women in this way.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

Mosca enters the room in the house where Lady Would-be is talking to Volpone. Volpone tells Mosca to get rid of Lady Would-be, who has been torturing him with her incessant talking. Mosca asks if she has given any gifts, but Volpone says he doesn't care, and that he'd pay any price to get her away from him. Mosca then tells Lady Would-be that he saw Sir Politic where she wouldn't expect: rowing in a gondola with the most cunning whore in Venice.

Volpone shows here that his primary desire (which will become excessive and corrupted) is not greed for money. Instead, it is desire for pleasure and comfort. He would rather be comfortable and rid of Lady Would-be than get more money from her.

Lady Would-be runs off with Nano to look for her husband, and Volpone praises Mosca for his "quick fiction" which got rid of Lady Would-be. Mosca says that Corbaccio is coming soon with his will, and Volpone says that he feels alive and ready for both trickery and his sexual encounter with Celia. He gets into bed and draws the bed curtains.

Mosca's "quick fiction" echoes the Prologue's reference to Jonson's "quick comedy," cementing the notion that Mosca is like a playwright, actor, and director within the play.

ACT 3, SCENE 6

In Volpone's house, Mosca ushers Bonario to a hiding space to witness Corbaccio disinheriting Bonario. Alone, Bonario says he still doesn't believe that his father is going to disinherit him, and he hides.

Mosca is like a director, placing Bonario as a set piece, while also turning the disinheriting into a theatrical scene to be witnessed. It seems like he is doing this simply to create chaos.

ACT 3, SCENE 7

Corvino and Celia enter the room where Volpone is lying in bed and Bonario is hiding. Mosca intercepts Corvino and Celia, saying they have come too soon. Corvino says he was afraid that he'd come too late. Aside, Mosca wonders if ever a man was so hasty to become a cuckold. Mosca tells them to wait, and he goes to Bonario's hiding place. Meanwhile, Corvino asks Celia if she knows why he brought her there; she doesn't. He says that now he'll tell her, and they talk on one side of the stage.

As Mosca's plans become more complex and more theatrical, they all start to converge on each other, heightening the play's drama. Corvino himself has been acting in order to conceal his intentions and trick Celia, but at the same time he is still the subject of Mosca's trickery, since Mosca has used false information to manipulate Corvino. In other words, ironically, Corvino believes he has been concealing the truth from Celia, but what he is actually concealing is just another one of Mosca's lies.

While Corvino explains the situation to Celia, Mosca tells Bonario that Corbaccio isn't to come for a half an hour. He tells Bonario to go into a different room and wait for the time, and Bonario consents, but says in an aside that he doubts Mosca.

Mosca's ability to perfectly manipulate everyone comes into question as Bonario begins to doubt him. It's consistent with the play's moral message that it's Bonario, who represents honesty and goodness, who is the first person to see through the ruse. This underscores Jonson's belief that the truth always wins out in the end.

Corvino says to Celia that there is no going back now, and that since he ordered her to sleep with Volpone, she has to do it. Celia begs him not to give this strange test, and she says if he doubts her chastity, he can just lock her up forever. Corvino says that he isn't jealous, and that he just wants her to be an obedient wife and do as he says. He explains that the doctors have prescribed this, that by doing it she will win him Volpone's fortune, and that she needs to obey. She questions his honor, but he says that there is no such thing as honor. **Gold**, he says, is no worse after having been touched by someone else, and clothes are worth no less after being looked at. He views his wife in the same way, and he says that Volpone is old and sick and cannot hurt her. He also assures her that no one else will know about it.

Corvino's claim that honor doesn't exist is predicated on the notion that honor is purely external—it only exists insofar as a person has the appearance of honor—instead of an innate quality, or a quality based on integrity of behavior. Drawing the comparison to gold, he says that innate, internal value is not corrupted by a change in appearances (as though ordering Celia to sleep with Volpone is troubling only because of how it looks). He uses this analogy to claim that Celia won't be valued any less from sleeping with Volpone, but really Corvino's words just reveal how corrupted he himself is.

Celia then begs Corvino to be jealous and to act like her sleeping with Volpone is a sin, but he says that if he thought it was a sin he wouldn't tell her to do it. He argues that it is in fact a pious act, or a charity for **medicine**. In an aside, Volpone praises Mosca for engineering the situation, and Mosca tells Corvino to come closer to the bed. Mosca announces that Corvino has come to prostitute his wife, freely of his own insistence, to Volpone. Volpone thanks Corvino while pretending he is very near death, and tells Corvino to use the fortune well when he inherits it.

Corvino certainly does not believe that sleeping with Volpone is pious, since we have seen he threatened to rain down hell and murder Celia for even speaking with him. Instead, he is saying whatever he has to in order to get Volpone's wealth. His greed has corrupted his integrity; he will say (or believe) absolutely anything to secure the fortune.

Corvino instructs Celia to go to Volpone and threats to hit her if she disobeys. Celia says that she would rather die than sleep with Volpone, but Corvino curses and threatens to drag Celia home by the hair through the streets like a whore. He then describes a horrifying punishment if she disobeys: he says he'll buy a slave, kill the slave, bind the slave to Celia, and hang her at the windows with crimes written into her skin with acid. In the face of this horrible punishment, Celia simply says that he may do as he pleases, since she is his martyr.

When Celia disobeys Corvino, he returns to his excessively controlling, ultra-violent threats, explaining the gruesome torture that Tarquin famously threatened to do to Lucretia (two prominent Roman figures in literature and history). While Lucretia capitulated, Celia, boldly, does not.

Corvino becomes increasingly angry that Celia will not acquiesce, believing she is intentionally trying to disgrace him. Mosca interrupts Corvino's fury and convinces him that Celia will be more likely to comply when Corvino isn't in the room, so Mosca and Corvino exit. As soon as they leave, Celia cries out to God, asking why all human shame seems to have vanished and wondering why Corvino is being so dishonorable to himself and to God, all for money.

Celia, aligned with heaven, religion, and goodness, properly understands Corvino's moral lapse: he has let desire for money corrupt him and supersede all sense of honor, shame, and duty. Thus, the two characters in the play whose names point to their goodness (Celia and Bonario) are the only ones who can see through and resist deception.

Volpone then jumps out of bed and says Corvino has never "tasted the true love of heaven." He says that the person who would sell Celia for personal gain has sold his part in paradise, and has found a buyer in Volpone. He asks why Celia is so amazed to see him suddenly revived, saying she should instead applaud the miracle of his recovery, which he attributes to her. He then admits that he was the mountebank she threw the handkerchief at earlier that morning.

Tasting the true love of heaven is a pun on Celia's name, which means heaven. Volpone chides Corvino for selling Celia for personal gain, but he also believes that the transaction is legitimate, so while he thinks Corvino is a fool, he believes that Celia is truly up for sale, and that he and Corvino can control her. The logic is wickedly twisted, and shows Volpone's inability to think beyond his own desires.

Celia protests, but Volpone keeps talking. He says that she shouldn't let the fact he was bedridden make her think that he really is. He says that he's as fresh, hot, and in excellent spirit as he has been in his youth. He then sings her a song in an attempt to convince her to take part in "the sports of love" while they have time to. In the song, he also assures her that it's not a sin to steal the fruits of love. At the song's end, Celia cries out for a poisonous mist or a bolt of lightning to strike her.

Volpone's assurance that he is, in fact, young and healthy echoes Corbaccio's claim that seeing Volpone so ill made him feel twenty years younger. All of these corrupted characters feed on misfortune and sin. It's notable, too, that Volpone's desire for Celia has him singing and performing like his entertainers usually do. This suggests that Volpone, without Mosca to do his bidding, is more like a fool than a schemer (Mosca, for example, would try to manipulate Celia through language).

Volpone asks Celia why she is sad, since she has found a worthy lover to replace her "base husband." He tells her to see what she is queen of, showing her his treasures. One by one he shows her extremely beautiful and expensive items. He then describes a meal they can eat of exotic meats. Celia says that this might convince someone else, but that she values and enjoys only innocence. She says that that once she loses her innocence, she will have nothing.

Volpone believes that his wealth will make him desirable, though Celia (rightly, according to Jonson) values innocence, chastity, honor, and religion above gold. To her, the loss of innocence is permanent and it vastly outweighs the impermanence she recognizes in wealth.

Volpone says if she has wisdom, she will listen to him. He offers all of the pleasures his wealth can offer, including entertainment from his fools and anything that she can imagine. He says they can change shapes and act out Ovid's tales about seduction, and then modern forms, and pour their souls into each other.

Volpone keeps trying to use his material wealth to convince Celia; he simply doesn't understand how she could value anything above money. Here, acting is referenced again in the play, this time taking on a sexual meaning.

Volpone then attempts another song to seduce Celia, but she cuts him off and begs him to listen to her. If he has the ability to listen, if he has any honor or manliness or understanding of heaven, she says, he'll let her go. If not, she asks him to kill her. If he won't let her go or kill her, she begs him to feed his wrath instead of lust, since wrath is manlier, and since he can punish her for "the unhappy crime of nature" which he wrongly calls her beauty. She asks him to cut her face or poison her for seducing him, or do anything that makes her ugly without taking her honor. She offers to kneel and pray for Volpone, and to say publicly that he is virtuous.

Celia realizes that Volpone has been corrupted by his excessive desire, but she pleads with him to feed one desire instead of the other – wrath over lust. She also appeals to his sense of manliness. Contrary to Lady Would-be, who believes that a woman's appearance is most important, Celia believes that her beauty is a crime of nature or a curse, and she wishes she were less *beautiful, not more.*

Volpone responds in anger, and tells her to yield or else he'll force her. Celia cries out to God, and Volpone seizes her, but Bonario leaps out from his hiding place and curses out Volpone. Bonario tells Volpone to free Celia on pain of death. Bonario says he would kill Volpone on the spot if not for his desire to see Volpone face justice. He tells Celia that he'll protect her, and the two flee from Volpone's house. After their flight, Volpone cries out for his house to bury him since he is undone.

It's important to contrast the behavior of Bonario and Volpone. If Bonario had excessive anger and a desire for vengeance, the situation might have turned bloody. However, Bonario refuses to be corrupted by desire, anger, or passion. Bonario chooses not to kill Volpone because he believes in justice and restraint.

ACT 3, SCENE 8

Mosca enters the room where Volpone has just tried to rape Celia. Volpone notes that Mosca is bleeding, and Mosca says that he has been wounded by Bonario. Volpone tells Mosca that Mosca has made him miserable, and Mosca says that he is miserable, too. Mosca didn't think that Bonario would eavesdrop. Mosca says that if his heart could fix the situation, he'd pluck it out, and he asks if Volpone would like to hang him or slice his throat. Mosca says they should die like Romans since they lived like Greeks, and then someone knocks. Volpone suspects it's officers come to arrest them, and Mosca tells him to go back to bed and resume pretending that he has a **disease**. He says that guilty men always dread what they deserve, but when he opens the door, he finds it's Corbaccio.

"Dying like Romans" refers to committing suicide, as Romans were famous for killing themselves after failure. "Living like Greeks" refers to their life of leisure and pleasure. That the guilty suspect and dread the punishment they deserve reinforces the play's notion that avariciousness sows the seeds for its own downfall and punishment.

ACT 3, SCENE 9

Corbaccio enters and asks Mosca why he is bleeding. Mosca explains that Corbaccio's son, Bonario, somehow found out that Corbaccio was going to disinherit him, and so he hurt Mosca and promised he would kill Corbaccio and Volpone. Corbaccio exclaims that he will disinherit Bonario because of what he has done. As they talk, Voltore enters secretly, unnoticed by them.

Mosca once again demonstrates his ability to improvise by immediately convincing Corbaccio of a new lie. It's ironic that Corbaccio says he'll disinherit Bonario for the (fake) violent deeds, because the only reason that Corbaccio was there in the first place was to disinherit Bonario. Voltore's unnoticed presence creates another layer of dramatic irony, because the audience sees him enter and knows that he, like the audience, can overhear Mosca and Corbaccio.

Corbaccio then asks Mosca how Volpone is doing and if he will die soon. Mosca says that he's afraid Volpone will live past May, which Corbaccio mishears as 'today.' Corbaccio asks if Mosca can poison Volpone, but Mosca says no.

Corbaccio's deafness reminds the audience about his age and infirmity, which in turn explains his request that Mosca poison Volpone. While the other suitors must work to appear like they care about Volpone's health, Corbaccio can't afford to because he simply doesn't have time to waste. This suggests that when greed becomes more extreme and urgent, all senses of morality and keeping up appearances are superseded.

Voltore then steps forward, having seen Mosca apparently working with Corbaccio. Mosca is able to convince Voltore that he is only pretending to work for Corbaccio for Voltore's benefit, saying that he convinced Corbaccio to name Volpone heir so that Voltore would inherit an even greater fortune when Volpone dies. He explains that he brought Bonario in to witness Corbaccio naming Volpone heir in the hopes that Bonario would become violent with Corbaccio. However, when Celia came in on an unexpected visit, Bonario seized her, wounded Mosca, and said that he'd murder Celia if she and Mosca didn't swear that Volpone tried to rape her. Bonario has also apparently run out to accuse his father, to defame Volpone, and to defeat Voltore. Voltore tells Mosca to bring Corvino to court to stop Bonario's plan. Corbaccio tries to listen in, but he can't hear, so he just exits with Voltore. Volpone rises from bed and prays that Mosca is successful in weaving this intricate web of lies.

It's possible that the reason Mosca gives for bringing Bonario to the house is true, but this also might just be a lie used to manipulate Voltore. Again, Mosca tells one of the suitors—this time Voltore—that part of his work to secure Volpone's fortune for Voltore is to keep up appearances around Volpone and the other suitors. And again, while this reminds the audience that Mosca is a character in a play, ironically it does make Voltore realize that Mosca is acting around him. *Mosca is able to convincingly pretend to be on Voltore's side because Corbaccio can't hear him, but also because Voltore stands to gain so much from Mosca's help that he is blinded to the truth.*

ACT 4, SCENE 1

In the piazza, Sir Politic tells Peregrine that he is ready to give advice for the inexperienced traveler in Venice. He warns Peregrine to always keep a stern, careful disposition and to avoid telling secrets, trusting anyone, or saying something that could be even misconstrued as political. Sir Politic advises avoiding getting too close with either foreigners or fellow Englishmen, and he says that Peregrine is likely to be tricked often.

Sir Politic's advice is filled with dramatic irony, since Peregrine and the audience know that Sir Politic is himself an inexperienced traveler. For example, he advises not to get close with fellow Englishmen while doing exactly that with Peregrine. At the same time, Sir Politic reveals his self-importance as well as his paranoia.

Sir Politic continues giving traveler's advice, saying that Peregrine should avoid talking about religion, and that he needs to learn how to use a silver fork. He should also learn the composition of Italian glasses, and the appropriate hours to eat melons and figs, which he says is extremely important to Venetians. If Venetians see someone even a little "preposterous," they see right through him and ridicule him immediately. Sir Politic boasts that he has been living in Venice for fourteen months, and that he was able to pass for a citizen within his first week there.

When Sir Politic says that if Venetians detect even a hint of falsehood, they see through the disguise and recognize one as a foreigner, it's not clear whether his bragging that he blends in is a commentary on the ridiculousness of Venetians, or whether it's another example of Sir Politic's deluded self-importance.

Sir Politic gives some of his credentials for passing as Venetian (he has read important Italian books, he has furnished a home, he has worked with the Jewish pawnbrokers). Sir Politic then boasts that he has the ability to make someone a fortune with some of his entrepreneurial pursuits, though he claims he will not reveal them to Peregrine. In an aside, Peregrine says he wishes he had another friend there so he could bet money that Sir Politic will immediately reveal his business ideas.

Sir Politic's "credentials" are all Italian stereotypes. Peregrine's aside that he wishes a friend were there to witness Sir Politic's absurdity is ironic, since the audience fulfils that role.

As Peregrine predicted, Sir Politic starts laying out his ideas for business ventures. His first idea is to import red herrings to Venice from Rotterdam, where he has a secret contact. He brags that he'll be able to do it easily and that he has all of the logistics figured out. He says that a small boat carries three men and a boy, and one can make three round trips between Venice and Rotterdam a year. If they make one of three successful trips he'll break even, and if they make two he'll be able to pay of loans. The plan, he says, is just in case his main project fails.

Sir Politic's fish business venture is absurd: a small boat is extremely impractical to make the long trip to Rotterdam. Here, the playwright seems to be ridiculing commerce itself.

Peregrine asks what Sir Politic's other plans are, and Sir Politic says he doesn't want to give away his thousands of ideas. He says that wherever he goes, he thinks analytically, and that he has in his spare time come up with many beneficial ideas for Venice which he hopes to present (for money) to a Venetian legislative body. He claims that he already has contacts in the Venetian government, and he explains that even common men can make suggestions to the government. While he looks for notes about this venture in his clothing he makes Peregrine promise not to reveal or steal any of the business ideas.

Sir Politic is the absurd antithesis of a wise traveler. Note that while Sir Politic is afraid of tricks and wary of corruption, he himself claims to have secret contacts inside the Venetian government.

Peregrine swears not to steal Sir Politic's ideas, but Sir Politic cannot find his notes. Peregrine asks him if he can remember the ideas, and Sir Politic begins explaining. The first idea for the government is about tinderboxes for lighting fires. Sir Politic says that they are very common and very small, and he worries that someone who wanted to attack the state could very easily carry a tinderbox in his or her pocket and start a fire in a shipyard. Therefore, Sir Politic proposes a way for Venice to monitor who is able to have tinderboxes (only patriots) and he suggests that tinderboxes be made only larger than pocketsize.

The tinderbox scheme is another farcical business venture meant to satire commerce itself; Sir Politic offers an impractical solution to a non-existent problem.

Sir Politic's next idea is for a way to easily find out whether incoming ships from Syria or the Middle East are carrying the plague. Usually ships are required to wait in quarantine for fifty days before coming in to port, but Sir Politic has an idea to expedite the process to only one hour. The plan is to bring the ship between two large brick walls (which the state will pay for). Using a net, a water-powered wind machine, and large quantities of onions, he will blast air across the ship and into the onions. Since onions are known to attract the infection of the plague, they will change color and instantly show if the ship is carrying the plague.

While fear of the plague was legitimate, Sir Politic's solution of blasting air across ships into a net full of onions is clearly absurd. Such a device might have even accelerated the spread of plague, since it could have allowed plague-riddled ships into the country. It's notable how many pseudo-scientific medical procedures are proposed in the play. It shows how little was understood about health and disease, and the fear and misinformation that this vacuum of knowledge created. Jonson's mocking tone when he discusses pseudoscience also shows, though, that there was enough knowledge for some people to discern what was bad science.

Sir Politic looks for his notes again, saying that he has a plan that (if he were traitorous) he could use to sell Venice to the Ottomans. Peregrine points out that Sir Politic is holding a book, but Sir Politic says it's his diary, not the business notes. Peregrine takes the diary and reads a sample entry about a day on which Sir Politic tore his laces, bought toothpicks from a merchant, paid to have his stockings fixed, and peed at Saint Mark's. Sir Politic explains that he doesn't let anything happen in his life without writing it down.

Sir Politic's final absurd plan is one to overthrow Venice for profit—any distinction he wants to draw between himself and the politically/morally corrupt Venetians is now clearly void. His diary is comically detailed. Note that travelers were encouraged to record their thoughts and daily activities while abroad, though probably not to the level of detail that Sir Politic records his life.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

A distance away from Sir Politic and Peregrine, Lady Would-be, Nano, and two waiting women enter the piazza. Lady Would-be is looking for Sir Politic, since Mosca said he saw Sir Politic with a Venetian prostitute. Lady Would-be wonders if her husband is already inside of a brothel. Complaining that the heat is doing more harm to her skin than Sir Politic is worth, she rubs her checks and complains that her makeup is coming off too easily.

Lady Would-be reinforces the idea that she cares above all about her appearance, which contrasts to the last time Celia appeared. She believes that Sir Politic has been corrupted by his time in Italy and is therefore with a prostitute, since travel had such corrupting potential. This is ironic coming after the previous scene, in which Sir Politic showed himself to be just as corrupt as any stereotype of Venetians.

One of the waiting women points out Sir Politic, and Lady Would-be assumes that Peregrine is the female prostitute dressed in men's clothing. Sir Politic sees his wife and tells Peregrine he wants to introduce her, complimenting her to Peregrine, who jokes that she must talk a lot if she is his wife. Sir Politic tries to introduce Peregrine to Lady Would-be, but she thinks that he is the prostitute, so she begins yelling at Sir Politic for being so dishonorable and for breaking his oath to her.

In this comic exchange, Lady Would-be believes that Peregrine is a lady disguised in a man's clothing. This has some meta-theatrical irony, as Lady Would-be would have been played by a man in woman's clothing, as women did not act in English renaissance stage productions.

Lady Would-be then addresses Peregrine, saying that she doesn't want to publicly flight with another woman, since it is not lady-like, but that it's impolite for one woman to wrong another by sleeping with her husband. Sir Politic and Peregrine are confused, and Lady Would-be compares Peregrine to a siren, to a famous eunuch, and to a hermaphrodite. Peregrine comments that even Lady Would-be's furious ranting is filled with literary references.

Telling Peregrine that fighting in public is not lady-like is ironic, since Peregrine is not a lady, and also since the role Lady Would-be would have been performed by a man. Her literary references show she is more educated than the typical renaissance woman.

Sir Politic tries to say that Peregrine is a gentleman, but Lady Would-be cuts him off to yell that she is ashamed of him and that he should have more shame for spending time with a whore, a "female devil in a male outside." Sir Politic turns to Peregrine and says that if Peregrine is, in fact, a hermaphrodite and a whore, he can't spend time with Peregrine anymore. Sir Politic leaves and Lady Would-be begins yelling at Peregrine, saying she thinks that he is only dressed as a man to avoid legal punishment for being a prostitute. Peregrine asks if Lady Would-be always acts this way and tries to leave, but she grabs his shirt to prevent him. He jokes that she might be trying to give his shirt to Sir Politic, and he makes fun of her red nose. Lady Would-be remains furious.

In a new height of absurdity, the ever-gullible Sir Politic actually begins to believe that Peregrine is a woman. Lady Would-be is obsessed with her appearance, and she has even commented on her nose, makeup, and face color earlier in the play, which is why Peregrine's jokes strike such a nerve with her.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

Mosca enters the piazza where Lady Would-be has been screaming at Peregrine. Mosca asks Lady Would-be what's wrong, and she replies that the Venetian government had better support her. She explains that she has captured the prostitute that Mosca told her about, and Mosca replies in confusion that the prostitute he mentioned is currently in front of the senate. Lady Would-be releases and apologizes to Peregrine, saying that she hopes he'll forget the incident and that he should "use" her if he stays in Venice. Mosca and Lady Would-be leave for the senate. Alone, Peregrine is convinced that Sir Politic staged the whole embarrassing situation with Lady Would-be. Believing himself the victim of a prank, Peregrine decides to try a prank on Sir Politic in revenge.

Lady Would-be's usage of the word "use" can have a sexual connotation, which, once again, establishes a contrast between Lady Would-be and Celia (who would do anything to maintain her virtue). Peregrine is embarrassed by the whole debacle, and in deciding to get revenge on Sir Politic with a prank of his own, Peregrine reveals that he, too, has been corrupted by Italian behavior. Peregrine's corruption is light hearted and comedic compared to the other characters, but in this way the side plot echoes the moral lessons taught in the main plot.

ACT 4, SCENE 4

Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, and Mosca prepare to go before a court of law. Voltore says they've figured out how to manage the situation with Celia and Bonario, and Mosca confirms that they have all agreed on the lie they are going to tell. Speaking aside, Corvino makes sure that Voltore does not know the truth of the matter, and Mosca says that he made up a story to preserve Corvino's honor. Corvino is afraid that Voltore's speech in court will make him a co-heir, but Mosca says they're just using Voltore for his speaking ability.

Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino have now all been co-opted into one of Mosca's dramatic fictions. That this will be a court drama underscores the play's theme of appearance and reality; all have agreed on the lie to tell in a venue dedicated to finding the truth. After seeming shameless when offering Celia to Volpone, Corvino is now concerned about his public image and the honor he said did not exist, reasserting the importance of appearance over reality for the corrupt characters.

In an aside to Voltore, Mosca makes fun of Corvino for being a cuckold. Then to Corbaccio, Mosca says that only Corbaccio will receive the fortune, and that the other men don't know for whom Mosca is really working. Mosca keeps whispering asides to himself and to all three men, convincing them all he is on their side. Just before the court session is about to begin, Mosca tells Voltore that he has another witness if needed.

Mosca revels in his ability to simultaneously fool all three men, even when they are together in the same room. This arrogance lays the groundwork for his downfall. The extra witness Mosca refers to is Lady Would-be, who believes Celia is the prostitute Mosca pretended he saw with Sir Politic.

ACT 4, SCENE 5

Four Avocatori (judges) enter the court where Mosca, Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino have been talking. Bonario, Celia, the Notario, the Commendatori, and other officers also enter. The Avocatori say that the senate has never heard such a strange case before, noting that both Celia and Bonario have good names, and that Corbaccio, Corvino, and Volpone all have done terrible things. They wonder why Volpone isn't present, and Mosca says that Volpone is too weak to appear in court and has sent Voltore to be his lawyer.

The Avocatori are the most powerful figures of legal (and moral) authority in the play. Their comment that Bonario and Celia have good names refers to their apparent good reputation, though it also underscores that their literal names are associated with goodness and heaven, respectively.

When the Avocatori ask who Mosca is, Bonario says that Mosca is Volpone's parasite. Bonario asks the court to force Volpone to appear. Despite an objection from Voltore, the Avocatori send to officers to get Volpone. As the officers leave, Voltore says that the sight of Volpone will bring pity to the court, and he asks if he can speak in for Volpone in the meantime. The Avocatori say Voltore can speak freely.

Bonario uses "parasite" in the pejorative sense, though Mosca has already shown that he takes no offense at the term. Voltore knows that certain aspects of the story might be lies, but he still truly believes that Volpone is sick and will gain pity from the Avocatori.

Voltore says that he is about to reveal the most shameful events ever to take place in Venice. He says that Celia is completely false in her claims and her tears, and that she has had a secret affair with Bonario. He also says that Corvino has been an innocent and an extremely lenient husband. Voltore says that Corvino has been forgiving, but Celia and Bonario did not appreciate this and continued in their crimes. Hearing about his son's behavior, Corbaccio decided to disinherit Bonario.

Voltore's attack on Celia hinges on the renaissance stereotype that women were fickle and inconstant. While Voltore manipulates the Avocatori, whose very purpose is to find the truth, he himself is being manipulated by Mosca. Voltore knows he's lying about some things, but ironically he has no idea that what he thinks is true is also a lie. Bonario and Celia, meanwhile, experience dramatic irony in the situation, since they know the truth, but unlike the audience (or like Mosca and Volpone) they do not benefit from the irony or find it humorous.

After some interjections by the surprised Avocatori, Voltore continues his lengthy, verbose speech, accusing Bonario of entering Volpone's home with the intention of killing Corbaccio and regaining his inheritance. When Bonario was prevented from murdering his father, he dragged the sick Volpone out of bed, wounded Mosca, and set out with Celia (who was very happy to participate) to defame Corbaccio, Corvino, and Volpone in court.

On one hand, Voltore's ability to manipulate the court could be dismissed as theater. At the same time, it could be argued that Ben Jonson is commenting on the theatricality of court processes and of lawyers, suggesting that lawyers are no different than actors, both using language to obscure reality in a setting where truth is subjective.

An Avocatori asks what proof Voltore has, and Bonario says that they shouldn't listen to Voltore's "mercenary tongue." Bonario also says that Voltore would even argue against God in court. The Avocatori say that Bonario is forgetting his place in court, and Voltore uses this as an opportunity to make Bonario look bad. The Avocatori tell Voltore to provide his proof and witnesses, and Celia exclaims that she wishes she could forget she is a living being.

Bonario criticizes Voltore for the same reason Mosca earlier praised him: he'll argue any side of any case. Celia's exclamation that she wishes she could forget she were a living being is tragic, showing her utter despair and speaking to the powerlessness of women at that time.

Voltore calls forward Corbaccio to testify, but Corbaccio cannot hear well, so he ends up only cursing out and disowning Bonario. Corvino is then called forward. Corvino calls Celia a whore, and says that she wants to cling to Bonario, whom Corvino sarcastically compliments. Corvino publicly declares himself a cuckold, and in an aside he checks with Mosca to make sure that he shouldn't be ashamed. He then says that he hopes Celia will go to hell, which causes her to swoon.

Corvino's greed has so fully corrupted him that he has lost all sense of even how his appearance reflects on him, requiring him to check with Mosca to make sure he shouldn't feel shame. Celia is religious (and her name means heaven), so his evocation of hell is particularly difficult for her to hear.

The Avocatori say that Corvino is acting out because of his grief, and they silence him. Mosca tells them that he received his wound from Bonario, who he says instructed Celia to accuse Volpone of rape. The Avocatori begin to doubt Celia, saying that she "has too many moods." Voltore and Corvino depict Celia as a false, loose, deceptive woman. Voltore says that even today Mosca witnessed Celia "bait[ing] a knight" on a gondola. Mosca says that the knight's wife is there ready to testify, and the Avocatori tell him to bring her in.

While the Avocatori first believed Celia, Voltore has successfully introduced doubt and insulted her character by trading on the stereotype that women are hysterical, untrustworthy, and fickle. Throughout the play, Jonson shows the absurdity of certain stereotypes (that women are necessarily fickle and poorly-educated), while re-enforcing others (that the Venetians are corrupt).

ACT 4, SCENE 6

Lady Would-be enters the court and immediately curses out Celia as a whore. She then apologizes at length if she has been dishonorable or offensive in court. The Avocatori ask Bonario and Celia what witnesses they have to their defense, and they say only their consciences and heaven, which never fails the innocent. But the Avocatori say that these are not testimonies.

Lady Would-be quickly realizes that attacking Celia too violently hurts her own public appearance, which is her highest priority. Bonario and Celia do not have proper testimonies, which must be delivered through language, a power that they lack, especially in comparison to masters like Voltore, Mosca, and even Lady Would-be. This is another instance in which language is equated with deception, a curious position for a playwright to take in a morality play.

Volpone then enters, pretending to be diseased and disabled. Voltore says that he will offer testimony that will silence Celia and Bonario. He points to Volpone and asks the court if the sickly man could possibly have raped Celia. Bonario says he wants Volpone tested for impotence, and then Voltore describes some tortures, which he says (sarcastically) have been said to cure some ailments. Voltore says that even after these curing tortures, Volpone will still have as many **diseases** as Celia has adulterers and Bonario has whores. Voltore closes his argument by calling Celia and Bonario slanderers and asking a series of rhetorical questions that amount to 'if you don't convict them, who is safe?' The Avocatori call for Celia and Bonario to be taken into custody, they let Volpone go home, and they thank Voltore for revealing the plot. Then the Avocatori, the Notario, the Officers and Celia and Bonario all exit.

In cases like this one, it was common for the accused to be tested for sexual impotence. Ironically, the Avocatori praise Voltore for revealing the truth, when actually Voltore has only further obscured reality by spreading Mosca's carefully crafted fiction. Again, this could be a comment on the justice system, equating the court room to a stage, where actors use language and deception to manipulate and conceal reality. Until the truth is revealed and justice is delivered, it appears that Ben Jonson has distrust for the court system, which could stem from his own personal experience of being tried for the murder of a fellow actor.

Voltore asks Mosca what he thought of the trial, and Mosca praises Voltore, saying if he were as skilled as language he could have made Voltore heir to the whole city. Mosca then tells Corvino to go out in public, saying it's much better that people think he is a cuckold than if they knew he tried to prostitute his own wife. Now, Corvino says, people will blame Celia instead of him. Corvino is still suspicious of Voltore competing for Volpone's wealth, but Mosca reassures Corvino and he exits. Corbaccio tells Mosca to go make Volpone's will, and Mosca agrees, saying that a fee for Voltore's lawyer services must be deducted. Corbaccio pays Voltore the fee and tips Mosca before exiting. Mosca then reassures Voltore, who also exits. Mosca turns to Lady Would-be and says he'll bring her home. At first, she resists, but he starts to say that he will convince Volpone to name her heir, and Lady Would-be immediately cuts Mosca off and agrees with him.

It's notable that Voltore's virtuosic and deceptive court performance (which relied on language) caused Mosca to part with money (paying Voltore his lawyer fee) for the first time in the play. This is a sign of how highly-valued language is among the corrupt characters. Lady Would-be's immediate change of heart at the mention of Volpone's fortune reinforces how obsessed everyone, even the English, could be with money, and how easy it is for that desire to become obsessive and corrupting, leading to bad decisions.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

Volpone returns home after the court scene, attended by servants. He monologues, saying that the crisis is over. Never before in his life was the disguise so difficult—it had been easy in private, but difficult to keep up in public. His leg started cramping in court, making him think for a moment that he had instant paralysis, but he decides not to worry, since he believes that obsessing over his fears would bring him **disease**. He decides to prevent the bad thoughts (and the disease) by making merry and chasing away the fear with wine. Hoping that some new plot will make him laugh and restore him to health and good spirits, he continues drinking and calls Mosca into the room.

Here Volpone explicitly shows his fear that all of his obsession with disease will turn into reality, and his leg cramp raises the possibility that the stress caused by Volpone's deception might actually be affecting his health. The fact that he already wants a new plot shows how his avariciousness is corrupting him; he has only just gotten out of trouble for attempted rape, but he immediately wants to undertake some new ruse.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Mosca enters the room where Volpone has been drinking. He asks Volpone how he is doing, and if they are free to continue with their lives and their trade. Volpone praises Mosca for his ability to trick everyone and get Volpone out of trouble for his attempted rape. Mosca asks Volpone if he enjoyed the elaborate ruse, and Volpone says it was better than if he had enjoyed Celia. He says the pleasure of womankind can't compare to the pleasure of fooling others.

In the previous scene, Volpone suggested that he wanted to do another ruse, showing that his true excessive desire is for pleasure at the expense of fooling others, not money. He reinforces this here, saying that the pleasure of fooling everyone is greater than the pleasure he might have gotten from successfully raping Celia.

Mosca tells Volpone that he thinks they should quit while they are ahead and stop their ruses, since the last trick was their masterpiece. Volpone and Mosca talk about how incredible it is that Mosca was able to hoodwink the court, make the innocent seem guilty, and create a "music out of discords." Volpone finds it incredible that Mosca has been able to convince all the men (Voltore, Corvino, and Corbaccio) that he is on their side without getting them to suspect him or each other. Mosca replies that they are all too possessed by their own hopes for Volpone's fortune to see that they are being manipulated. He says they will resist any claim contrary to their aims, even if it is obviously true, which Volpone compares to a temptation of the devil.

The artistry of Mosca's ability with language is stressed by the comparison of his cross-plots to a "music of discord." Mosca's explanation of how he was able to fool everyone highlights a difference between audience members, who are able to recognize that they are watching a play, and the suitors, who never suspect that they are being deceived, thereby reinforcing Ben Jonson's moral lesson. By becoming corrupted by greed, one loses the ability to distinguish between appearance and reality, as well as the sense of self-awareness that the play values.

Mosca says that merchants brag about making money from trade, and great men talk about valuable farm land, but no investment is more productive than taking money from Voltore, Corvino, and Corbaccio. Mosca then asks Volpone how he liked Voltore's work in the court, to which Volpone responds that he struggled to keep from laughing. Mosca says that Volpone looked scared, and Volpone admits to being a little frightened but not terrified of being discovered. Out of conscience, Mosca says that Voltore did such a good job saving Volpone that Voltore doesn't deserve to be cheated out of payment. Volpone agrees based on what he was present for in court, but Mosca says that Voltore was even more impressive before Volpone arrived.

Mosca's line about merchants and great men makes fun of Voltore, Corvino, and Corbaccio, and also satires commerce (thereby Venice). Here, Mosca genuinely praises Voltore for his language abilities and for saving Volpone, and for once he seems to genuinely petition for some benefit for one of the suitors. Even the master swindler doesn't want to swindle Voltore after his help in court.

Volpone agrees with Mosca that Voltore was excellent, but Volpone says he can't pay Voltore yet. Instead, Volpone will trick them all once more. Volpone calls in Nano and Castrone and instructs them to go into the streets and tell people that Volpone has died. They leave to go do Volpone's bidding, and Mosca asks what he is trying to accomplish. Volpone explains that all at once he'll get Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, and Lady Would-be to come running, thinking that he is dead and that they are heir, only to have their hopes taken away from them. Volpone instructs Mosca to act like he is the heir. Volpone signs a blank will and dresses Mosca in a mourning outfit.

Volpone doesn't explain to Mosca why he wants to trick everyone again instead of paying Voltore, but the audience should know by this point that it's because his desire for pleasure has become excessive, and his judgement has been corrupted by it. At this point, there isn't even a pretense that Volpone desires more money; all he seeks to gain is the pleasure of embarrassing and infuriating his suitors. In this last, disastrous plot, Mosca becomes a performer and Volpone the director.

Mosca asks Volpone what he should say if people ask to see Volpone's body, and Volpone responds that Mosca should say it was corrupted. Volpone tells Mosca to get a pen and paper and pretend he is taking inventory of all he is inheriting. Volpone will then watch from behind a curtain as Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino become enraged and depressed. Mosca says that Lady Would-be will also come, and he says that **gold** is the most effective **medicine** and the thing that makes everything in the world beautiful. Voltore knocks (since "he has the quickest scent"), and Volpone hides and tells Mosca to be artful when he torments all the suitors.

Here there is yet another use of the word "corrupted," this time meaning that Volpone's body is supposedly rotten after his death. However, by this point in the play the audience would have taken it quite literally. "The quickest scent" refers to a vulture, which might be the quickest bird to find a corpse, just as Voltore is the first suitor to come upon hearing news of Volpone's (fake) death.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Voltore enters Volpone's house and asks Mosca what is going on, but Mosca ignores him and speaks out loud the inventory he is writing down. Voltore assumes the inventory is for him and asks to see the will. Corbaccio enters and asks Mosca if he is the heir, but Mosca ignores him, too. Corvino enters, and wonders why Voltore and Corbaccio are also there. Lady Would-be enters and asks Mosca if she is the heir, but he just keeps taking inventory. Mosca then casually gives them all the will.

Volpone has set up this whole series of interactions to revel in the dramatic irony of the situation: the suitors all think he is finally dead, but really he is hiding and laughing at their expense. The suitors are all so convinced, so blinded by greed, and so certain that Mosca is nothing but a parasite, that they still do not even suspect that Mosca has tricked them or been named heir.

Volpone watches in glee as Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, and Lady Would-be scan the will to determine who has been named heir. They all realize it's Mosca, and they are perplexed, enraged, and doubtful. They all question Mosca, but he keeps ignoring them, until he says that he'll talk to them all tomorrow. Lady Would-be isn't satisfied with that answer, so Mosca tells her that she should remember she implicitly offered him sexual favors in exchange for being named heir. He tells her to go home and be with Sir Politic, or else he'll tell people what she did. She then exits.

The dramatic irony is palpable as the suitors search the will for what the audience (and Volpone) already knows. Mosca begins to wield the dangerous power he has crafted for himself: knowledge of the truth. One aspect of constantly acting and keeping up appearances for (and with) everyone is that Mosca has the potential to reveal what he knows is reality.

Corvino confronts Mosca, but Mosca shouts back that Corvino should have led the way out of the house. He makes fun of Corvino for being a willing cuckold, and a publically-known one, at that. Mosca says that Corvino might want to reclaim the gifts he gave Volpone, but Mosca will keep them in exchange for not revealing that Corvino tried to prostitute his wife in exchange for a fortune.

As mentioned above, one aspect of Mosca's theatrical ruses that has not yet been explored is the fact that he has knowledge of the (often embarrassing) reality, thus allowing him to blackmail his victims like he does here with Corvino.

In an aside, Volpone expresses his delight with Mosca's villainy. In his own aside, Voltore says he believes Mosca has been fooling everyone else on his behalf. Corbaccio, who has terrible eyesight, is finally able to read the will, and he exclaims when he realizes that Mosca is the heir. Corbaccio confronts Mosca, but Mosca makes fun of him for being old and chides him for perjuring himself in court and disinheriting his son. Corbaccio exits.

Voltore reinforces the irony of the scene by thinking that Mosca is acting with everyone else but never with him. Corbaccio seems older than ever. While believing he was about to inherit the fortune made him feel twenty years younger, his deafness and infirmity are emphasized here to suggest that in being denied the fortune all the positive effects have been reversed.

Thinking himself finally alone with Mosca, Voltore praises him for being so faithful to him. Mosca ignores him, and Voltore tells him that he can stop the act since the others are gone. Mosca says he's sorry that his luck has cost Voltore the benefits that he deserves, but Mosca reaffirms that he has been named the heir and that the will of the dead must be obeyed. He says it's lucky that Voltore doesn't need the fortune since he is an educated lawyer, and as long as men are wicked there will be lawsuits. Mosca says that if he ever needs a layer he'll call upon Voltore, but in the meantime Voltore shouldn't be jealous. Mosca thanks Voltore for the **gold** plate he presented Volpone at the beginning of the play, and he sends him home.

Referencing the gold plate is harsh and probably infuriates Voltore, but Mosca seems to be kinder to Voltore overall than to the others. This is possibly because Mosca respects Voltore's language ability. It's also, perhaps, because Mosca doesn't have the same kind of blackmail on Voltore, since Voltore is less guilty of breaking societal rules than others. Voltore was simply the lawyer; he knew that some of Mosca's story was false, but he didn't know that the attempted rape really happened.

After Voltore leaves, Volpone jumps out of his hiding spot to praise and hug Mosca. He is so impressed with Mosca's mischief that he says he wishes he could transform Mosca into a Venus. He instructs Mosca to dress up like an aristocrat in public to further torment everyone. Mosca believes that this new prank will end their ability to profit off of everyone, but Volpone believes that when he reveals that he's still alive he can continue the scam. Volpone then decides to disguise himself to further torment those seeking his wealth. Mosca suggests dressing him up as a commendatori, and Volpone says that in disguise he'll be a **disease** onto everyone.

Volpone is so pleased with Mosca that evidently, he wants to turn Mosca into a woman (a Venus) so that he can have sex with him. Volpone then gives Mosca yet another costume and role, this one extremely provocative: Mosca will subvert the social order and dress like an aristocrat. Mosca is realistic, and he knows that Volpone's fake death and Mosca's treatment of everyone in this scene will ruin their ability to run the old scam. Volpone, on the other hand, is influenced by greed for pleasure, avarice, and hubris, and he convinces himself that the scam can continue once his fake death has been undone.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

Peregrine enters Sir Politic's house in disguise, along with three Mercatori (merchants). Peregrine makes sure that he is disguised enough, and says that his goal is only to frighten Sir Politic. The merchants joke about sending Sir Politic off on some ship, and Peregrine says that Sir Politic would probably write some exaggerated tale about whatever adventure he ended up on.

Believing himself the victim of a prank, Peregrine has adopted the Italian way and decided to stage his own elaborate ruse as payback, complete with other actors (merchants) and a costume.

Peregrine knocks and says he is a merchant here to see Sir Politic. Sir Politic's servant says that Sir Politic is busy with stately affairs, but Peregrine asks again. Sir Politic eventually agrees to see Peregrine once he is convinced that Peregrine is not a spy. He enters and apologizes to Peregrine, saying that he's had a disaster with his wife earlier that day.

That Sir Politic can even have a disaster with his wife (the Peregrine-prostitute debacle) shows that their dynamic is far removed from Corvino and Celia's ultra-controlling relationship.

Peregrine says that he must deliver a worse disaster to Sir Politic. He says that the man Sir Politic met earlier in the day was a spy, and that the spy reported to the senate that Sir Politic had a plan to sell the State of Venice to the Ottomans. Peregrine then claims to have warrants to search Sir Politic's home. Sir Politic asks what to do, and Peregrine says that he should curl up and hide.

The spy that Peregrine references is, of course, himself. Sir Politic is gullible and self-important enough to believe that he really is being spied on – he thought his letters were being intercepted, after all. Ironically, Sir Politic told Peregrine to avoid spending time with Englishmen since they might be spies, and now he is being punished for not following his own advice.

Outside, the merchants knock while Sir Politic scrambles. Sir Politic says he has a plan for such situations, and he produces a tortoise shell. He curls up into a ball and has Peregrine lay the shell on top of him, planning to pretend that he's a tortoise until the people he believes are government officials have left. He tells his servant to burn his papers.

Like his business ventures, Sir Politic's plan to hide from the government is ridiculous. In a play in which characters' names reference animals from fables, a tortoise might have been chosen to reinforce the fact that Sir Politic is slow, or it could reference either the story of the tortoise and the hare or the tortoise and the bird from Aespo's Fables.

Peregrine exits and the three merchants rush in. They ask where Sir Politic is hidden, and Peregrine reenters, saying now that he is a merchant who has come to look at the tortoise. They joke about the tortoise, and Peregrine says the merchants can stand on the tortoise if they like. They prod him to get him to crawl on the floor, threatening to jump on him. Peregrine whispers to Sir Politic that he should crawl, and he crawls a little. Then the merchants lift the tortoise shell off of Sir Politic and expose him. Peregrine then reveals his own identity, and tells Sir Politic that now they are even.

Sir Politic's disguise is hilarious because it's so terrible. The dramatic irony is that, though Sir Politic thinks he's able to fool the Merchants, everyone on stage (and in the audience) knows that the tortoise is really Sir Politic. This is all extremely embarrassing for Sir Politic, and it's also a satire on the absurdity of commerce and merchants.

After Peregrine and the merchants exit, Sir Politic asks a servant where Lady Would-be is and if she knew about the ruse. He complains that he will be the talk of the town for the embarrassing ordeal he just endured. The servant says that Lady Would-be is in a terrible mood, and Sir Politic compares himself to a tortoise and laments his situation.

Sir Politic is concerned that his reputation as a perfectly assimilated traveler will suffer from Peregrine's embarrassing prank, which shows a complete lack of self-awareness; nobody takes Sir Politic seriously. Sir Politic also completely misses his own joke in comparing himself to a tortoise after just pretending to be one.

ACT 5, SCENE 5

In Volpone's house, Mosca is dressed like an aristocrat while Volpone has assumed the disguise of a commandadore. They each make sure that the disguises are convincing. Aside, Mosca says that if he remains in disguise as an aristocrat, he might become one. Volpone leaves to find out what's happening at the court.

By dressing like an aristocrat, Mosca challenges the social order, drawing a parallel to the playwright himself who fought hard to climb social rankings. Much like Jonson disparages the power of language in this play, his comparison of Mosca's disguise to his own rise in social status seems to effectively undercut Jonson's legitimacy in his professional and social lives.

Alone in Volpone's home, Mosca says that the "fox is out of his hole," and he plans to make Volpone pay for the new ruse, unless Volpone is willing to make a deal. He then calls Androgyno, Castrone, and Nano, and tells them to go outside. Alone again, Mosca outlines a plan to get some of Volpone's money. Since Volpone is pretending to be dead and Mosca is named heir, Mosca says he'll force Volpone to stay fake-dead until he agrees to share some of his fortune. Mosca says that no one would call it a sin to cheat Volpone, and that Volpone's tricks will pay for themselves. He calls his plan "the Fox Trap."

Mosca here is taken by his own desire, possibly for money, possibly for increased social status, possibly for both, since they go hand in hand. Ironically, he justifies his plan to steal Volpone's wealth by disparaging Volpone's own trickery. Playing on Volpone's name, Mosca gives his plan the name "Fox trap" (almost as if it were a play, not a scheme). It's reminiscent of Hamlet's plan to trap his uncle with a play called "the Mouse Trap."

ACT 5, SCENE 6

Corbaccio and Corvino are talking in the street, agreeing that they need to maintain the stories they told in court. Volpone enters in disguise, and he merrily greets Corvino and Corbaccio, pretending that he thinks they have inherited a vast amount of wealth from Volpone. He makes fun of them, pretending to think that they are being modest to conceal their wealth. They grow furious, and after Volpone comments that Celia is a common woman, they exit. Volpone then sees Voltore approaching.

Volpone's interaction with Corbaccio and Corvino is rife with dramatic irony, since he pretends to think that they are acting modest, when in reality, he is the one who is in disguise. Of course, this also draws attention to the fact that all three men are simply characters acting in a stage production.

ACT 5, SCENE 7

Voltore enters the street where Volpone (disguised) has just made fun of Corvino and Corbaccio for not inheriting his wealth. Voltore is furious, and he curses that he was fooled by a parasite. Volpone says that the court is awaiting Voltore, and he says he rejoices that Volpone's fortune was inherited by someone good with money. Voltore is confused, and Volpone continues toying with him by asking if he can have one of the houses that Voltore has just inherited. Volpone taunts Voltore a little more, and Voltore exits. Volpone then turns back to Corvino and Corbaccio.

Voltore is angry because he has wasted time and money trying to gain inheritance, but he also hates that he was fooled by lowborn person—a parasite, whose social role should be serving. Part of the irony is that the only difference between a parasite and a bird of prey is that the parasite slowly feeds on the living while a vulture waits until the food is dead.

ACT 5, SCENE 8

Corbaccio and Corvino reenter the street, where Volpone is still in disguise, in order to taunt everyone who wants to inherit his fortune. Mosca passes by dressed like an aristocrat, and Corvino and Corbaccio are furious. Volpone asks them if what he's heard about Mosca is true, and says that he's sad that a wise old man like Corbaccio could fall prey to a swindling parasite like Mosca. Volpone also says that Mosca seems to carry himself like an aristocrat. He then tells Corvino that he thought such an experienced merchant would not have dropped his cheese "to let the Fox laugh at your emptiness." Corvino threatens Volpone and says he'd become violent if it wasn't forbidden near the court. Volpone makes a joke about Corvino being a cuckold. Mosca reenters, and Corvino and Corbaccio decide to leave because they don't want to be around Mosca. Volpone tells Mosca to deal with Voltore next.

Volpone's reference to Corvino dropping his cheese while the fox laughs echoes a reference to Aesop's Fables *Volpone made earlier in the play. On one hand, this line simply reinforces the play's animal fable influence. But at the same time, it also shows the Volpone is aware of this connection. Volpone also uses the line about "the Fox" to further taunt Corvino and Corbaccio, since his name means Fox. He's thus able to dangle the truth in front of them and admit that he's the one manipulating them while taking pleasure in the fact that the* still *don't see the truth. Corvino is deterred from violence by the law, once again suggesting that the reason he didn't kill Volpone earlier in the play was legal, not moral.*

ACT 5, SCENE 9

Voltore enters the street and calls Mosca a fly, saying that his fortune will soon turn for the worse. Mosca tells Voltore not to speak so unsuitably and un-lawyerly, and then exits. Volpone asks Voltore if he should have attacked Mosca, and Voltore recognizes Volpone as the man who has been taunting him. Volpone says he's furious that a lawyer was able to be tricked by someone like Mosca, who is uneducated, and he expresses his hope that Voltore is just pretending not to be the heir in order to confuse Corvino and Corbaccio. Voltore gets furious and curses out Volpone, and Volpone responds that he knows that Voltore is so wise that he could not possibly have been tricked.

Mosca's name means fly, which is why Voltore calls him that. Volpone repeats the same joke he made with Corvino and Corbaccio, pretending that he thinks Voltore is acting when really Volpone is the one acting in a disguise. Again, Volpone is indulging his excessive desire to humiliate his suitors. This desire has corrupted his judgement, and it will ultimately lead to his downfall.

ACT 5, SCENE 10

The Avocatori, the Notario, Bonario, Celia, Corbaccio, Corvino, and Commandatori all enter the courtroom. They note that Voltore is missing, but he soon enters with Volpone. While Volpone, Corbaccio, and Corvino all make confused asides to themselves, Voltore apologizes to the court and to the innocents (Bonario and Celia), saying that he lied before. Celia praises the justice of heaven, and Volpone says he has been caught in his own noose.

Voltore begins to reveal (what he thinks is) the truth, thereby restoring faith in the court system as a legitimate means of finding truth instead of another stage where reality is obscured. Volpone's claim that he has been caught in his own noose (i.e., ruined by his own ruse) echoes his line early in the play: "What a rare punishment is avarice to itself!"

Voltore continues confessing, saying that his conscience is making him tell the truth. He then says that Mosca was behind everything. Volpone, still disguised, offers to go bring Mosca to court. Corvino says that Voltore is confused and distraught from not being named Volpone's heir. Corvino says that Volpone is dead, and the Avocatori start to believe it, as the suitors place the blame entirely on Mosca.

It's difficult to say if it's conscience that makes Voltore confess, frustration with his loss of the fortune, or a desire for vengeance. Corvino doesn't want the truth to come out, because he's so embarrassed that he tried to whore his wife for the fortune.

At the same time, the Avocatori realize that if Mosca is truly the heir, then he is now a person of wealth and status. They request his presence in the court. Voltore continues trying to tell the truth, and he provides a written statement to the Avocatori. Corvino and Corbaccio know that their reputations are on the line, so they both say that Voltore is lying, and Corvino even says that Voltore is possessed.

Simply inheriting the fortune would completely change Mosca's social status. While gold might not have all the magical medicinal effects described in the play, it does instantly increase social ranking. It's interesting that this passage moves from a focus on spoken to written language, since written language is less improvisational, and in this case, it's also more secretive. Usually the audience participates in dramatic irony because it knows all of the information, but here the audience does not get to see what Voltore has written.

ACT 5, SCENE 11

Volpone enters alone on a different part of the stage, though the courtroom remains visible. He laments that he has created his own downfall by enacting his latest ruse. He was free and clear after Voltore cleared his name, but by indulging himself and faking his death he has nearly ruined himself. He says that Mosca needs to help fix things or they are in serious trouble.

Volpone recognizes that he fell prey to the very predicament he predicted: he was corrupted by his excessive desire for pleasure. Despite his self-awareness about his own culpability, he still thinks that Mosca's deception can fix a problem caused by deception.

Nano, Androgyno, and Castrone enter, and Volpone asks them who told them to leave his estate. Nano reports that Mosca told them to leave and took all of the keys. Volpone says that he is now even deeper in trouble, and he curses himself for not being able to handle his fortune without indulging his whims and scams. He tells Nano to seek out Mosca in the hope that Mosca doesn't really intend what Volpone suspects. Then Volpone says he'll attempt to convince Voltore to go back to the rehearsed lie by giving him new hopes—after all, it was provoking Voltore that caused him to confess in the first place.

Volpone depicts wealth in a new light here: as a burden. In this understanding of wealth, anyone who has money faces the temptation of being corrupted by it. While Volpone has said that he believes wealth gives people qualities typically thought of as internal, like honor or wisdom, he shows that he also recognizes some important qualities are internal and separate from gold, like self-control.

ACT 5, SCENE 12

Back in the courtroom, the Avocatori struggle to make sense of the new information provided to them in Voltore's statement, which appears to exonerate Celia and Bonario. Voltore's story concedes that Bonario was wronged and that Celia was forced to Volpone's home by Corvino, but Voltore denies the attempted rape because he believes that Volpone is sick and invalid. Corvino maintains that Voltore is possessed.

Voltore's written statement is distinct from his spoken language in that it is not improvised, and it also appears to be honest. It also seems to be restoring faith in the court to legitimately distinguish between appearance and reality.

Volpone enters, still disguised as an officer, and says that Mosca will arrive soon. When Voltore is about to address the court, Volpone whispers to him that Mosca says Volpone is still alive, and that Voltore is still the heir. Volpone explains that the fake-death was a test to see how loyal Voltore is. Voltore immediately regrets confessing, and Volpone suggests that Voltore fall down and acts like he is possessed. Voltore falls and groans, while Volpone describes symptoms associated with possession. Corvino confirms it is the devil, and Corvino, Corbaccio, and Volpone perform an impromptu exorcism on Voltore.

As Volpone predicted, Voltore's conscience or desire to tell the truth is immediately overtaken by the reawakening of his greed and the possibility of inheriting Volpone's money. Voltore's fake possession and the false exorcism is an absurd bit of meta-theatre, which is somehow convincing to the Avocatori.

Once Voltore has been exorcised, the Avocatori say that if he was really possessed than his written statement cannot be trusted. Voltore says that everything he wrote is false, and that Mosca is as innocent as Volpone, who Voltore now says is still alive. The Avocatori, Corvino, and Corbaccio are all shocked and confused at the news.

Though the written language appeared to be exonerating and truthful, Voltore is able to recant it with spoken language and the absurd, theatrical possession claim. His claim that Mosca is as innocent as Volpone is filled with dramatic irony, since it's true, but not in the way he means it; Mosca and Volpone are both equally guilty.

Mosca then enters, and one of the Avocatori comments in an aside that if Volpone is really dead, he will set Mosca up with his daughter. Aside, Volpone tells Mosca that all was nearly lost when Voltore confessed, but he says he has got things under control. Mosca, however, ignores Volpone, and he tells the court that he has been busy planning Volpone's funeral. Volpone realizes that Mosca is planning to have a funeral for the "dead" Volpone, thereby inheriting the entire fortune and robbing Volpone of everything. In an aside to Volpone, Mosca asks for half of the fortune, and Volpone first denies him. While answering questions in court, Volpone agrees, in an aside, to split the fortune with Mosca, but Mosca says he wants more.

Greed, we see, is not even beyond the Avocatori, one of whom quickly hopes to get his family involved with Mosca if he has inherited the fortune. This trades on the notion of political corruption in Venice, particularly since this corruption is within an institution uniquely devoted to finding the truth. Here, Mosca and Volpone are showing that they cannot stop themselves from the avaricious behavior that has threatened their downfall so many times and will now seal it.

Mosca acts as though Volpone, who is dressed as an officer, is annoying him, and the court orders that Volpone be taken away. When Volpone realizes that he is betrayed, and that Mosca is about to cheat him out of his fortune and marry the daughter of an Avocatori, Volpone takes off his disguise and reveals himself. He then says he's going to bring Mosca down with him, and that his fortune won't make Mosca a person of status or get him into a good family. Volpone admits publicly that he has been fooling Voltore, Corvino, and Corbaccio.

In a moment of extreme pride, Volpone decides to reveal everything rather than allow Mosca to successfully swindle him and subvert the social order. It's possible that Volpone is so proud of his years of fooling everyone that part of him wanted to reveal the entire ruse to get recognition for what a master deceiver he is. After all, his pleasure is deception more than money.

The Avocatori say that now everything makes sense to them. They release Celia and Bonario, and Bonario says that "heaven could not let such gross crimes be hid." The Avocatori, disgusted with the way that Volpone and the suitors have been acting, strip Mosca of his aristocratic clothing and begin giving sentences. Since Mosca was the main agent of Volpone's plot, and since he impersonated a nobleman, he is sentenced to life imprisonment in the galleys. Volpone cannot get the same sentence because he is a nobleman, so they strip him of his fortune and sentence him to a life in prison, during which his limbs will be immobilized with weights (essentially a death sentence). For giving lawyers a bad name, Voltore is essentially disbarred and banished from Venice. Corbaccio is confined to a monastery and stripped of his wealth, which is bequeathed to Bonario. Corvino is subjected to public humiliation, and is legally separated from Celia. The newly imprisoned are taken away, and an Avocatore says that "mischiefs feed like beasts, till they be fat, and then they bleed."

The play's moral force ultimately proves greater than the ability of its characters to obscure reality. Bonario's line that heaven could not allow such terrible things to remain hidden speaks perfectly to the moral conclusion and the play's treatment of appearance versus reality. The powers of theatre and language can manipulate appearances, but the realities of truth, goodness, evil, and morality will always be revealed. The punishment of the play's major characters reinforces the lessons about the impermanence of money, since no one ends up with the fortune, and the dangers of allowing desires to become excessive and corrupting. The Avocatore's line about mischief feeding like beasts is a final reinforcement of the play's notion that too much of anything, good or bad, is dangerous.

Volpone then steps forward to deliver the epilogue. He says that though he has been punished by the law, he hopes for applause for the play. He hopes that the audience enjoyed the show, and says if they did, they should clap.

The epilogue and the traditional request for applause is a final way for Ben Jonson to stress that everything that the audience has seen has been a fiction, but that through that fiction an important, true moral lesson has (hopefully) been imparted.

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