

BEN JONSON'S *VOLPONE* AND THE CORONATION OF PROSOPOPOEIA

ANTHONY W. JOHNSON

Anthony W. Johnson, M.A., PhD (Oxon.), is Professor of Philology and Head of English Philology at the University of Oulu, Finland; president of the Finnish Society for the Study of English (FINSSE) and vice-president of the Nordic Association of English Studies (NAES). Johnson's books include two Oxford volumes: *Ben Jonson: Poetry and Architecture* (Clarendon Press, 1994) and *The Country Captain, by William Cavendish, Earl of Newcastle*, an edition for the Malone Society (Clarendon Press, 1999); an edition of *Three Volumes Annotated by Inigo Jones: Vasari's "Lives" (1568), Plutarch's "Moralia" (1614), Plato's "Republic" (1554)* (Åbo, 1997); and (with Professor Roger D. Sell) a collection of essays by world authorities on *Religion and Writing in England 1558-1689: Studies in Community-Making and Cultural Memory* (Ashgate, 2009). Works currently under completion include an imagological introduction to *Ben Jonson* for the Writers and their Work New Series (forthcoming at Northcote, 2010); an edition of a previously unpublished long poem from 1669—the *Fasti Cantuarienses* of John Boys with Lit. Verlag (forthcoming 2010)—a collaborative edition of essays entitled *Humane Readings* (Benjamins, 2010); and two works for Eyecorner Press (Denmark): an edition of five Restoration plays from the King's School Canterbury and an introduction to Cultural Imagology (both forthcoming in 2010). Anthony has very much enjoyed visiting Miskolc in the past, where he delivered a course between 25 and 28 October 2004, which combined two of his favorite topics: Cultural Imagology and Renaissance Literature.

In the preface to his *Fables* (written much in the spirit of forerunners like Aesop and Babrius), the fifth-century Latin poet Avianus observed that, in his chosen genre "fiction, if gracefully conceived, is not out of place, and one is not oppressed by the necessity of adhering to the truth."¹ For the early Jacobean Jonson—who had spent much of 1605 being harassed for the topical (and potentially seditious) content of his part in collaborations on the comedy *Eastward Ho* as well as the tragedy *Sejanus*—the thought of using an animal fable as a means of distancing the audience from the dangerous particularities of his work was no doubt a congenial one. For this reason it is perhaps unsurprising (although it does not appear to have been noticed previously) that Avianus's comment on fiction is underlined in Jonson's own copy of the fabulist's work (sig. a2).² Or that such issues may have been very much in the dramatist's mind in the five weeks of 1605 during which, sustained

¹ See Avianus's *Fabulae* in the Loeb edition of *Latin Minor Poets*, trans. J. Wight Duff and Arnold M. Duff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1961) 667-749 (esp. 681). Further references to this work (= Avianus) will be placed in the main body of the text.

² Jonson's copy of *Aviani AEsopicarum Fabularum Liber*, ed. Pulmannus (Antwerp, 1585) is housed in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, where it is bound up with Jonson's 1585 edition of Claudian's works. For a useful discussion of Jonson's Claudian, see David McPherson, "Ben Jonson's Library and Marginalia: An Annotated Catalogue," *Studies in Philology* 71.5 (1974): 1-100 [item 42].

by a substantial stock of Canary wine, Jonson apparently penned the whole of what was to turn out to be his first major comedy, *Volpone*.³

That this work is basically a beast fable is signified plainly enough by the transparency of its names (Barton 170-93). Within what is perhaps Jonson's best-known plot the protagonist, Volpone himself, is a Venetian *magnifico* who, true to the Italian meaning of his name, stereotypically behaves like a fox. Besides dressing in furs, Volpone makes a living out of that most proverbially fox-like of activities: deceit. Feigning an illness that brings him close to death—and aided in his deceptions by his servant Mosca (whose name, in Italian, connotes the idea of a “flesh fly”), the childless Volpone's basic strategy—which has captivated four hundred years of readers and viewers—is to egg on a series of aspiring heirs who present him with gifts in the hope of gaining his inheritance in the very near future. Appropriately enough, these scavengers (whose greed makes them fair game for the derision of the audience) are named after predatory birds. As readers will no doubt remember, there is Corvino (lit. “carrion crow”), the jealous skinflint who keeps his young wife, Celia, under lock and key but is prepared to prostitute her to Volpone's desires in exchange for his wealth. There is Corbaccio (lit. “raven”), the old man, hard of hearing, who cares for nothing more than his property but can nevertheless be persuaded to disinherit his own son (Bonario) in favor of Volpone when he thinks that he will thereby become the recipient of the latter's largesse.⁴ And there is Voltore (lit. “vulture”), the lawyer who does not demur from the manipulation of the law in pursuance of the same goals. Nor does the Jonsonian menagerie stop here. Developing the more English resonances of his terminological palette, the subplot revolves around the hawk-like gentleman, Peregrine, and his unlikely entrapment of the parrot-like butt of the play, Sir Pol(itique) Would-Bee, in a giant tortoise shell. Yet the allegory created through such a simple naming strategy is not without its subtleties. For instance, in a splendid exposition of the emblemism of the time, Ian Donaldson once pointed out that tortoises may have been taken by Jonson's contemporaries to signify the dual notions of policy and silence (both of which are conspicuously lacking in Sir Pol) (162-66). And in the light of the Avianus connection it may also be worthwhile remembering that another of the Latin poet's fables recounts the story of how the eagle (one of the peregrine falcon's relations) dropped an over-inflated tortoise from a great height as a warning to those whose aspirations rise too far above their station (Avianus 685-87).

³ Unless otherwise stated, all references to Jonson's works are from C.H. Herford, and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (eds), *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-52) (hereafter referred to as H&S in the main body of the text according to volume and page number). *Volpone* (hereafter referred to as *Volp.* in the main body of the text) may be found in H&S V, 1-137. For accounts of the composition of the play, see *Volp.*, 24 [“Prologue” l. 16]; and H&S I, 188.

⁴ In this light, it is interesting to come across a passage marked with a manette in Jonson's fifteenth-century manuscript copy of Juvenal's second Satire—now housed in St John's College, Oxford (MS 192, fol. 6)—where Laronia has been holding forth on the injustice of hypocrites in command and turns to describe how men, similarly, are hypocritical in the judgments they pass on women: “Our censor absolves the raven and passes judgement on the pigeon!” (translation from the Loeb edition of *Juvenal and Persius*, by G.G. Ramsey [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, Heinemann, 1979] 23, l. 63). For this is exactly what seems to happen to Celia and Bonario when they are condemned out of their father's mouths in the climax to Act IV.

To Renaissance English minds there was, of course, nothing exceptional about the employment of beast fables. Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* and Caxton's "englyshing" of the story of *Reynard the Fox* were, after all, among the first vernacular fictions to come off the Early Modern printing press. And Edmund Spenser, one of the great avatars of poetry while Jonson was in his formative years, had produced a substantial beast fable—titled *Prosopopoeia: Or Mother Hubberds Tale* (1591)—which Jonson owned and appears to have known well.⁵ In Renaissance rhetoric the word *prosopopoeia* (literally "to make a face" in Greek) was regarded as a figure of personification. Hence Spenser's satirical allegory—in which an Ape, aided and abetted by a crafty Fox, steals a Lion's skin (along with a crown and scepter), and attempts to rule the animal kingdom—justifies its title through this means alone.⁶ Prosopopoeia was, in fact, a standard device of the morality play tradition (so close to Jonson's dramatic practice) in which abstractions were personified, and it is quite understandable (especially with Spenser in the back of his mind) that Jonson should have sought to nuance the idea by bestializing (and hence, in a sense, "de-personifying") most of the *dramatis personae* within his own play.⁷

As against the terms of classical prosopopoeia, however (exemplified by Quintilian through the figure "*Avarice is the mother of cruelty*"—499 [9. 3. 89]), the employment of animal rather than abstract names signals a domain-shift from the morality play towards the genre of moral fable, and accordingly serves to emphasize Jonson's allegory through an *absence* of human attributes rather than through tangible presence. Yet this transformation does not wholly obscure the personification of abstract qualities through naming. The suspicion that Jonson is sensitive to the etymological resonances echoing within these names would seem to be confirmed, for instance, in the inner morphemes of, say, the lawyer Voltore, whose behavior traces out, on the one hand, the complex inner play of the Latin *volo*—which intransitively connotes flight but transitively signifies desire—and, on the other hand, the Italian idea of *volta* as a "turn." Hence in the court scene which forms the climax to Act V, Voltore shamelessly changes tack when he learns that Volpone is not as dead as Mosca had been making him out to be. By the same token, the morphemes of Volpone's name may be seen as posing the question of how to place ("*ponere*") or trace out the imperatives of what lies behind ("*pone*") the will or desire: a question which seems to drive Vol-

⁵ For Jonson's reading of this poet, see the book-length study by J.A. Riddell and S. Stewart, *Jonson's Spenser: Evidence and Historical Criticism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1995). For Spenser's poem, see *Spenser: Poetical Works*, eds. J.C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford UP, [1912] rpt. 1979) 494-508.

⁶ As the rhetorician Julius Caesar Scaliger puts it: "if intelligence is assigned to the non-intelligent or the half-intelligent such as animals, we have *prosopopoeia*" (*Poetices libri septem* (Lyons, 1561), III. xlviii—cited in Lee A. Sonnino, *A Handbook to Sixteenth-Century Rhetoric* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) 55).

⁷ Intriguingly, with respect to the possible intertextual relation of these two works, Spenser's Ape at one stage sets himself up as a "*Magnifico*" (l. 665)—styles himself "*Alla Turchesca*" (l. 677)—and, aided by the Fox (who plays a wide variety of roles), sets about inveigling gifts and money from aspiring courtiers. For the "perversion [...] of humanity" represented by Jonson's animal fable, see also Jonas A. Barish "The Double Plot in *Volpone*," *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jonas A. Barish (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 93-105; and Oliver Hennessey, "Jonson's Joyless Economy: Theorizing Motivation and Pleasure in *Volpone*," *English Literary Renaissance*, 38.1 (2008): 83-105.

pone's restless (and ultimately futile) search for satisfaction throughout the play. With respect to those readers for whom such readings of inner morphemes stretch the bounds of credibility, it may be worth remembering that Shakespeare's company (who gave *Volpone* its first airing in 1606) had played a similar game just a few years earlier when they staged the bard's most Jonsonian comedy, *Twelfth Night*: a work which seems to dramatize the complex interplay of music (viols), plants (violets, olives), love, and will (It. *voglia*) that is embedded in the names of the characters themselves (Viola, Olivia, Malvolio).⁸

At an altogether different level, prosopopoeiae served in the Renaissance as school exercises in which pupils ventriloquized the voices (or moral characters) of famous historical figures.⁹ In this sense (as Valentine Cunningham has recently demonstrated for the case of Hardy), the allusive names which pepper so many literary texts may be seen to have a wider resonance, as they are capable of bringing their own stories in to color the texts in which they make their guest appearances.¹⁰ And similarly—within the academic province which used to be known (in part, at least) as “source studies”—it is plain that the subtexts jostling within a work may occasionally take on significant roles as prosopopoeic partners to the texts that they inhabit. Unlike the case with most of Shakespeare's plays, for example, it is very hard in a reading of *Volpone* to fix on any small number of source texts which Jonson “worked up” into his own dramatic *oeuvre*.¹¹ Yet nevertheless, some of the clearer traces of his imaginative activities are fascinating. Certainly, the bizarre entertainment mounted for Volpone by his dwarf, eunuch, and hermaphrodite—celebrating the transmigration of the soul of Pythagoras into an ass—seems to take much of its imaginative leverage from Lucian's Greek stories of the transformation of the soul of Pythagoras into a cock (Levin 231-39) and of the transformation of a person into the body of a donkey: a tale which was famously retold by the Roman writer Apuleius in his *Golden Ass*. And in the light of these connections, a previously unremarked intertext for Sir Pol's tortoise shell also presents itself. For in his annotated Apuleius—now housed in the Bodleian Library, Oxford—Jonson appears to have underlined the passage (marking it with a little flower in the margin) in which one of the narrators, Aristomenes, recounts the tale of how, when a witch entered his room in the middle of the night and overturned the truckle-bed on which he was sleeping, he found himself underneath it like a tortoise (“*de Aristomene testudo factus*”).¹² What is suggestive about this is that, like Sir Politic Would-bee, the “tortoise shell” saves him, as from its safety he is able to peep out and witness the fate of his less fortunate companion (Socrates), who is murdered by the witch. Like Sir Pol, too, Aristomenes is noticed by his aggressor—who threatens to make an example of him for his over-curiosity, but lets

⁸ In this sense, the Renaissance device of *agnominatio*—creating meanings by playing round with the letters in a name—appears to become a significant element in prosopopoeia.

⁹ According to this definition, *Mother Hubbard's Tale* could also be a prosopopoeia because it is explicitly narrated in the voice of Mother Hubbard herself.

¹⁰ On this, see especially, Valentine Cunningham's rethinking of prosopopoeia in “*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*,” in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006) 548-58 (esp. 556-8).

¹¹ For the received opinion on Jonson's sources for the play, see esp. H&S II, 50-3; and IX, 678-82.

¹² See L. *Apuleii ... Opera omnia*, 2pts, ex officina Plantiniana, apud F. Raphelengium (Leyden: 1588), p. 7; McPherson (1974) [item 6]; and the Loeb edition of *Apuleius: The Golden Ass*, tr. W. Adlington (1566), rev. S. Gaselee (London: Heinemann, 1935) 21 [l. §12].

him go with his life. For a moment, perhaps, we may glimpse that peculiar strangeness, deriving from his profound re-thinking of the classical world, which helps to endow Jonson's drama with so much its richness of detail.

Although a deep source for the comic action of *Volpone* may be found in such texts, underpinned by the Latin plays of Terence and Plautus—alongside the Greek comedy of Aristophanes which, as Anne Barton has shown, may have helped suggest the patterning of the whole—more immediate models may also have been close at hand through the printed Italian comedy of the period (113-14). In this connection, Jonson's friendship with the Italian scholar John Florio may have been important. Florio (to whom Jonson gave an inscribed copy of *Volpone* in 1607), owned a substantial library of Italian literature to which Jonson certainly had access, and Jonson, as Barton has shown, ransacked Florio's Italian dictionary, *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598), not only for names in his earlier comedies (most notably every *Man Out of His Humour*) but also for *Volpone* itself.¹³ But beyond these felicities, the resonance of *Volpone* suggests a possible engagement with the Italian drama itself. In checking this out, one could do worse than compare elements of *Volpone* with those of *La Mandragola* (c. 1518), the best remembered comedy of the Florentine political philosopher and playwright, Niccolò Machiavelli. "NIC: MACHIAVEL"—as Sir Politique Would-Bee familiarly calls him in a passage which misrepresents the philosophy of his notorious guidebook for princes, *Il Principe* (*Volp.* 90 [IV. i. 25])—is, as Daniel Broughner demonstrated in the 1960s, a presiding figure over much of the pragmatic and cynical thought-world of the drama, while, as Harry Levin noted in 1943, there also appear to be a number of striking "coincidences" of resemblance between *Mandragola* and *Volpone*, especially with regard to the Corvino-Celia subplot (97, n. 14).

To open an Italian translation of *Volpone* side by side with *Mandragola* is to see how snugly Jonson's dramatic concerns—and even some aspects of his dramatic structuring—fit in with the Italian theatre of the sixteenth century. As in Machiavelli (who, like Jonson, drew much inspiration from Terence and Plautus), the location of the play is confined to a single city and its fictional duration to a single day. As in Machiavelli, in which much of the play is taken up by the attempt of a *magnifico* (Callimacho) to seduce a young beauty (Lucrezia) who is unworthily married to an ageing and parsimonious husband (Nicia), so *Volpone* is absorbed from the close of Act I onwards with the project of seducing Celia, the wife of the grasping merchant, Corvino. (Intriguingly, Nicia is referred to by Callimacho's servant as an "old buzzard" [*uccellaccio*] (*Mandragola* 91 [III. iv. 15]), while, at the end of the play, Nicia magnanimously gives Callimacho and Ligurio the keys to his house as they have no women at home and "live like beasts" [*stanno come bestie*] (*Mandragola* 189 [V. vi. 11]).)¹⁴ Both *magnificoes* first become intrigued by a verbal description of the women who are to become their objects of desire; both employ a parasite (Mosca in *Volpone*, Ligurio in *Mandragola*) to achieve their ends; both disguise themselves as medical practitioners in order (with complete success) to gain access to the beauties; both at some point empower others to impersonate them; and both manage to persuade the women's husbands to acquiesce willingly in the prostitution of their wives.

¹³ See esp. Barton 177-8 and 184-7; and H&S IX, 686-7.

¹⁴ In-text references here are to *La Mandragola di Niccolò Machiavelli*, ed. Roberto Ridolfi (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1965).

The main “problem” faced by each play with regard to the seduction theme is the wives themselves, as both regard “honour” to their husbands as being paramount and are uninterested in sex with others. What then becomes shocking in both plays is the extent to which the corruption of the community at large facilitates the progress of the magnificoes’ strategies. In the case of *Mandragola*, Lucrezia is eventually persuaded by the Church (represented by her confessor, Frà Timoteo), as well as her own mother and her own husband, to bed down (unwillingly enough at first) with Callimacho, and the play ends with a surge of male wish-fulfillment: Lucrezia finds that she enjoys the experience and wants it to be repeated; her husband and mother are happy because they believe that the event has “purged” Lucrezia into fertility (although Nicia is ignorant of the identity of the purger); and the Church is content because of the financial benefits it stands to accrue from all masculine parties involved. (Of Callimacho’s satisfaction nothing more need be said.)

Although much in the first four acts of *Volpone* suggests that some sort of generic prosopopeia is in action—that Jonson is “doing” Italian comedy and, perhaps, even (more specifically) *Mandragola*—Ben Jonson either does not dare or does not want to go as far as his Italian counterpart. Writing against an increasingly hostile Puritan influence among the City Fathers—and under the shadow of serious censure, imprisonment, or mutilation for stepping too far outside the limits of Jacobean acceptability—he spins his plot out like a yo-yo to the edge of the permissible, before hoisting it back toward a more tightly defined ethical center. So *Volpone* almost effortlessly achieves his bedroom scene with Celia, only to find that she is not complaisant to his wishes and is saved from his clutches by young Bonario, who is lurking nearby. (If, in terms of the play’s naming strategies, Celia [in Latin, *caelus* = “sky”] is the element in which Corvino lives and to which *Volpone* aspires; Bonario is, etymologically speaking, almost literally a breath of “fresh air” within the tainted moral world of the play.) So, too, the older generation of Venetians has connived so far with the web of corruption spun by *Volpone* and Mosca that their only way to save face is to abet the condemnation of Celia and Bonario on charges trumped up by the fox and the flesh-fly after the misfiring of their scheme.

If, therefore, *Volpone* had closed at the end of Act IV, it would have had much of the moral ambience of *La Mandragola*: *Volpone* and Mosca would have gone scot-free, and the virtue of the play’s two innocents would not have been rewarded. It is only after this resolution to the plot has been conceded that in Act V—a sort of addendum to the magnifico’s “master-peece” (*Volp.* 109 [V. ii. 13])—an overeager attempt on *Volpone*’s part to kick-start the already completed action, coupled with a fatal falling out between the master and his parasite, forces *Volpone* to unmask himself (in the process bringing down everyone who has become imbricated in his edifice of deceit), and the play crashes to a halt on a series of poetic justices.

Here the closure (as well as the language) of fable returns with a vengeance. Celia is sent back to her father with her dowry trebled (mothers apparently having no place in this almost obscenely patriarchal drama); Bonario is granted his father’s lands; Corvino is paraded around Venice in Ass’s ears before being placed in the stocks; Corbaccio is sent off to a monastery; Voltore is disbarred from the legal profession; Mosca is sent to work for the rest of his days as a galley slave; and *Volpone*, having had his possessions confiscated and donated to the hospital of the genuine “*Incurabili*” (*Volp.* 135 [V. xii. 120]), is sent to prison to lie in chains until he really does become sick and lame. “This,” as *Volpone* laments in

his last words before he is led away, “is call'd mortifying of a FOXE” (*Volp.* 135 [V. xii. 125]). Because it is a more self-consciously “moral” play than *Mandragola*, then, *Volpone* is necessarily darker. It might also be worth remembering, however, that the title on the early frontispieces of the printed volume of *Mandragola* (1515-18 and 1522) was *Comedia di Callimacho: & di Lucretia*: the heroine's name (as well as some aspects of her situation) recalling the grim classical story of the rape of Lucretia by Tarquinius Superbus. It is a tale which Machiavelli would have found recounted by Livy in Book I of his massive history of Rome—the *Ab Urbe Condita*—as well as Ovid in his *Fasti*,¹⁵ and which Jonson knew not only from these sources but also from Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* (not to mention the young Shakespeare, whose long narrative poem of 1594, *The Rape of Lucrece*, had captured the subject with a vitreous brilliance). Yet, although in the throes of infatuation Machiavelli's Callimacho declares that he will not stop at anything “beast-like, violent, or nefarious” [*bestiale, crudele, nefando*] (*Mandragola* 74 [I. iii. 22]) to alleviate his situation, he is thinking in this context of his own suicide rather than of any forced violation of his beloved. Indeed, Callimacho later tells Ligurio that he did not even begin to enjoy the consummation of his love with Lucrezia until she had reciprocated her feelings for him (181-3 [V. iv. 15 ff.]).

Within Jonson's play the case is very different. Because, however, *Volpone*'s corruptions are presented gently in Act I, his deceptions at first appear to be amusing rather than criminal. And because, from the outset, Corvino appears as selfish, grasping, and immoral—banking with a cold-blooded intensity on what he stands to gain from *Volpone*'s death (*Volp.* 41 [I. v. 4])—the ethical dimension of *Volpone*'s attraction to Celia is somewhat eclipsed by the prospect that their liaison will enact some sort of poetic justice on the husband. This feeling—which is also one of the main forces energizing Machiavelli's play—is, if anything, intensified in Act II when Corvino physically beats *Volpone* (who has been entertaining the audience as well as Celia in his role as the Mountebank Scotto of Mantua) and threatens his wife, before agreeing to prostitute her in the hope of plenty. By Act III, having established himself as a violent man and abusive husband, Corvino starts to take on the linguistic trappings of Tarquinius Superbus.¹⁶ When, like Lucretia, Celia hangs upon her husband's honor, Corvino casts the notion aside (*Volp.* 78 [III. vii. 38 ff.]). And where Tarquinius eventually gains Lucretia's submission by threatening not only to kill but also to discredit her by leaving her violated body next to that of a slave (claiming that he has slain both because he caught them *in flagrante*), so Corvino—in what may stand as one of the most unpleasant scenes of verbal violation in any Early Modern English comedy—browbeats his wife into acquiescence by threatening to cut her face from the mouth to the ears like a filleted fish, and to

¹⁵ See the Loeb editions of *Livy*, trans. B.O. Foster (London: Heinemann, 1961), vol. I, 196-208 [I. chs 57-60]; and *Ovid's Fasti*, tr. J.G. Frazer (London: Heinemann, 1931) 111 [II. 725 ff.].

¹⁶ “To make dead men speak,” as Jonson's mentor John Hoskins noted in his *Direccions for Speech and Style* (London, 1599) 48, is one of the functions of prosopopoeia (cit. Sonnino 1968, 55). In this way, as Cunningham has shown, prosopopoeia can promote the vicarious life of allusions in a new text.

buy some slaue,
Whom I will kill, and binde thee to him aliue;
And at my windore, hang you forth: deuising
Some monstrous crime, which I, in capitall letters,
Will eate into thy flesh with *aqua-fortis*,
And burning cor'siues, on this stubborne breast.
(*Volp.* 80 [III. vii. 100-105])

Even at this moment (after which Volpone is left alone with Celia), the possibility of a “positive” Mandragolan solution is still open within the play. Whether or not he has sex with Celia, the sprightly Volpone, who jumps from his bed to greet her, has the potential to liberate her from her plight.

At first it appears that he might actually do so. In a rhetorical *tour de force*, Volpone—now in “the true heau’n” of “loue” (*Volp.* 81 [III. vii. 140]): (a word which seldom intrudes into the textual surface of the play)—reveals his contempt for Corvino’s “earth-fed” mind and, in an attempt to win her attentions, boasts about the roles he has played in the past, including the part of Hadrian’s favorite, Antinous, in an entertainment for Henry Valois (who really was entertained at Venice in 1574) (*Volp.* 82 [III. vii. 159-64]). To crown it all, Volpone then breaks role again by wooing Celia in a song which has been remembered by posterity as perhaps the finest translation in the English language of the celebrated Latin poem, “*Vivamus, mea Lesbia,*” by Catullus (c. 84-64 BC):

Come, my CELIA, let us proue,
While we can, the sports of loue;
Time will not be ours, for euer,
He, at length, our good will seuer;
Spend not then his gifts in vaine.
Sunnes, that set, may rise againe:
But if, once, we lose this light,
'Tis with us perpetuall night.
(*Volp.* 82 [III. ii. 166-73])

Out of context, this offers one of the classic expressions of hot-blooded vigor, youth, and love: take your opportunities while you can; grasp the moment; seize the day (Lat. “*carpe diem*”). But in the play, sung by a Volpone who is smeared with oils to make him appear sick, it becomes grotesque. By this time, Volpone’s body language is already predatory—“CEL. Sir! VOLP. Nay, fly me not” (*Volp.* 81 [III. vii. 154])—and he is beginning to chase her round the room. Rather, then, than unmasking himself like Callimacho to reveal some essentially “real” and beneficent character behind the facade, the transition to music merely highlights Volpone’s lack of a centered, or grounded, personality. The masks hide an infinite regress of other masks: performative selves which, on account of that very fact, have no interest in listening or sympathizing with Celia’s plight, let alone of helping her.

This hollowness of Jonson’s protagonist may help explain why the rest of the scene is so unnerving to watch. As he attempts to corner Celia, Volpone proposes a sto-

mach-churning catalogue of roles (mainly taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), in which they could indulge while they are making love. She could play Europa to his Jove (in which case they would be enacting the story of a rape). She could be Erycine (Venus), to his Mars (in which case it would be a story of adultery with violent consequences). Or, having "weary'd all the fables of the gods" (*Volp.* 84 [III. vii. 225]), Celia could adopt more "moderne" forms of exoticism: appearing in racially coded scripts as French, Tuscan, Spanish, Persian, Negro, or Russian; and in socially differentiated parts as anything from the wife of a Shah or the mistress of a Sultan to an "art-full" courtesan (*Volp.* [III. vii. 226-32]). (We may remember here that the Lesbia in Catullus' poetry also ends up by being cast in this latter role.)

As an inducement for Celia to fall in with his wishes, Volpone, like some larger-than-life game show host, offers her what she least desires: worldly rewards of a mind-numbing tawdriness. In doing so, Jonson creates an oddly deflated mood through the use of over-inflated rhetoric. It is an effect which is heightened by Volpone's cultural philistinism: what could be thought of as a consistent devaluing (devalorization) or conspicuous waste of every potentially brilliant object that is on offer. Where he promises pearls, it is in order that Celia may dissolve and drink them. Where he proffers a jewel, it is a "carbuncle" so large that it could "put out both the eyes of our St Mark,"¹⁷ or a diamond that "would have bought" Caligula's wife, Lollia Paulina, which Celia is implored to wear and then lose (*Volp.* 83 [III. vii. 193-8]). In his important book on *Shakespeare, Jonson and the Myth of Venice*, David McPherson has shown how Jonson furnishes the Venetian setting of *Volpone* not only with convincing local detail but also with an image world deriving from that of Imperial Rome—particularly that of Caligula and Nero (*Shakespeare* 95-103). The inclusion here of Lollia Paulina—a wife who, the first-century historian and gossip Suetonius tells us in the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (chapter 25), was taken up on hearsay, married, and later discarded by the Emperor Caligula—is a good example of the way in which even the apparently glittering detail of the naming serves in the long run to undermine the grandeur to which Volpone's rhetoric gestures so visibly.¹⁸

In sum, this brief essay has considered the figure of prosopopoeia on a five-fold level: as a means of importing animal effects into characterization; through the morphemic embedding of abstract elements in a name; as a channel for generic ventriloquism (a device which has the potential to revitalize some areas of "source studies"); as a means of providing historically or mythologically allusive characters with a means of a vicarious life through their presence in the text; and as a way of enlivening discourse. And we have seen that these effects are particularly noticeable in Volpone's own persona, which dissolves into the multiplicity of identities that he ventriloquizes while his fantasy lovers, similarly, are continually remodeled into anything but themselves. For an audience watching, Volpone—perhaps the crowning figure in Jonson's prosopopoeic pantheon—is characterized by a mesmerizing flexibility and creativity which is immensely entertaining to watch. But for

¹⁷ Apparently a massive carbuncle was set in the coronation cap of the Doge (see H&S IX, 719).

¹⁸ It was Aristotle who took the lead in emphasizing the pragmatic importance of prosopopoeia for promoting vividness in a text: see the Loeb edition of Aristotle: *The 'Art' of Rhetoric*, tr. J. H. Freese (London: Heinemann, 1959), Book III. xi. 1-4.

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