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# Tease (Deception) and Fantasy (Illusion) in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*

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***Abstract***— *This paper attempts to examine and delineate the themes of the 'tease' and 'fantasy' in Ben Jonson's magnum opus, Volpone. The theme of the 'tease' is employed in the work as illusory deception. At the same time, 'fantasy' observes its presence through the imagination and the disillusionment; the fool's paradise as imagined by the characters present. The paper analyses the presence and application of these intertwined themes through a focused examination of the play's form, narrative, characterisation, and the playwright's use of language to represent the society of early 17th-century England.*

***Keywords***— ***Avarice, Ben Jonson, Deception, Illusion, Volpone.***

## I. INTRODUCTION

Written in a novel unprecedented form, Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, a satirical and moral comedy, occupies a unique space in his oeuvre. Often considered as his magnum opus, Ben Jonson presents complex thought and profound understanding of his craft when one analyses the various elements of the five-act play. Jonson, depicting his acute comprehension of society and his audience, masterfully intertwines themes of deception (tease) and illusion (fantasy) to deliver a poignant satire on the unchecked greed and human avarice. The interplay of the deceptive tease and the characters' immersion in their own fantasies and illusions serves their function of exposing the greed, human avarice, and moral corruption rampant during their time. This analysis focuses on the integral elements of deception (tease) and illusion (fantasy) as they exist in the form of the play and showcase their ubiquitous presence throughout the story, the characterisation, language and the setting as a social critique by the play.

## II. FORM OF THE PLAY

Considered the first unofficial Poet Laureate owing to receiving a royal pension in 1916 from James I, Ben Jonson, in his later life, played the part of a mentor to a younger group of writers called 'Sons Of Ben'. The society at the time of writing the play was undergoing a transition in its social and political landscape, rendered possible by the crowning of James I. Considered by some to be susceptible to flattery, under James I's rule, the landscape of England witnessed the developing prominence of the commercial class. The atmosphere was filled with anxieties owing to the rise of mercantilism, which often was followed by the relentless pursuit of unlimited wealth, the climbing of social ladders and the potential of avarice and greed corrupting traditional social structures. During such a time, Jonson exquisitely creates a comedy that incorporates several narrative techniques. Evidently a comedy of humours, where characters are dominated by one overriding trait or 'humour', the play exists on several levels of understanding of its form. The beast fable with its allegorical form is a type of play in which "animals and birds speak and behave like human beings [...] usually illustrating some moral point" (Abrams 9). As Dutton observes, "no other play of its era is so fully peopled with characters who are explicitly animals, birds, and insects, behaving exactly in the manner of Aesop's archetypal beasts, as the text knowingly reminds us" (qtd.in Fayadh 1). Adding another layer to the complexity of comprehension, several critics read it as influenced by late morality plays which "dramatized

allegories, in which personified virtues, vices, diseases, and temptations struggle for the soul of Man as he travels from birth to death" (Fayadh 2). This fusion of various elements and styles of writing is a form of teasing by Jonson of the audience who expects the play to be like any other 'Jonsonian' comedy; however, the illusion and fantasy of it being a simple city comedy is demolished when one studies its form.

## III. NARRATIVE

Ben Jonson's *Volpone* is a five-act comedy first brought to the stage around 1605-06 and subsequently published in 1607 as a quarto by George Eld for the publisher Thomas Thorpe. Considered quite a turning point in his career on the public stage, the plot, unmasking the human avarice and unbridled greed, revolves around the wealthy Italian, Venetian gentleman Volpone, as he, with his parasitic servant Mosca, orchestrates an elaborate scheme (qizi 1). Volpone's intricate plot unfolds through a series of escalating deceptions. By feigning a terminal illness, Volpone aims to manipulate a group of avaricious individuals into bestowing upon him valuable gifts, each hoping to be named his sole heir. This setup establishes the primary level of tease and deception, which, when doubled with the hunters' fantasy of inheritance, triggers the reveal of unrestrained greed and vice. The elaborate ploy of this primary 'tease' or deception of the hunters requires an equally exquisite physical complement. There is a tension between the play itself (play which, Jonson hopes, will be of moral value) and what goes on in the play, in which the devices of stagecraft that are involved in the play's actual production are a source of deceit, confusion, and moral corruption. In simpler terms, Volpone creates an entire production out of his deception, using special eye ointment to create a sick, just-about-to-die look (Fayadh 11-12). Interestingly, Volpone himself expresses concern that his prolonged pretence might harm his health, blurring the lines between his performance and reality "I am weary of my practice" (Jonson 5.1). The play, through various disguises, as Scoto the Mountebank and further during the trials, exposes to the audience the illusions that theatrical devices can create and exposes the reality of the psychological consequences of the elaborate charade created by the influence of greed and avarice.

The legacy hunters – Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino – are systematically manipulated by Mosca, who craftily assures each that he is the favoured candidate. He is lauded for his '*quick fiction*,' his remarkable ability to invent convincing narratives on the spot. Mosca's role as the director of this deception is crucial, as he anticipates the suitors' anxieties and provides the reassurances necessary to maintain their belief in the illusion of inheritance. Following events observe how entranced by the beauty of Celia, the virtuous wife of Corvino, Volpone adopts the disguise of Scoto the Mountebank to gain access to her appearance, subsequently launching attempts at her seduction. Mosca further complicates the web of deceit by convincing the jealous Corvino that offering Celia to the supposedly ailing Volpone as a restorative will secure his place as the primary heir. Volpone's swindling of legacy hunters leads to Celia's rescue by Bonario and a trial where lies conceal truth. The corruption even extends to the legal system, as evidenced by the ease with which Mosca and Voltore manipulate the court to serve their own selfish ends (Singh 8). Volpone's fake death naming Mosca heir backfires when Mosca tries to betray him. Volpone's vanity exposes their plot and the gulls' greed, resulting in their punishment as poetic justice is meted out. In Act V, Scenes V-IX, Volpone, disguised as a guard, cruelly taunts the legacy hunters after the news of his supposed death. This final act of 'tease,' fueled by Volpone's hubris, ultimately leads to his downfall by provoking Voltore's confession.

The subplot of Sir Politic Would-Be in *Volpone* involves a ridiculous English knight obsessed with appearing worldly-wise and knowledgeable about Venetian affairs, despite his naivety. He becomes the target of pranks and ridicule by the more sophisticated English traveller Peregrine, highlighting vanity, gullibility, and the satirical portrayal of English travellers abroad. This subplot, though largely separate from Volpone's schemes, mirrors the play's broader satire on human folly and self-deception.

## IV. CHARACTERISATION

Ben Jonson based his characters on his 'comedy of humours' theory, an idea derived from classical Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence. This approach involved creating character 'types' defined by a single, dominant characteristic revealed through their specific ways of behaviour. The irony and tease lie in the characters' obliviousness to their own folly, even as they attempt to outwit others.

Volpone, carrying his name 'the sly fox', is the central figure who initiates the primary deception and revels in the pleasure derived from the acts of deception. He revels in the act of "teasing" the legacy hunters, deriving as much pleasure from outwitting them as from the acquisition of their gifts. His first dialogue begins with him waking up and glorifying his wealth, "Good morning to the day; and next, my gold: / Open the shrine, that I may see my Saint" (Jonson 1.1).

Volpone is greedy not only for wealth, but for "gaining more power over his victims" (qtd. in Singh 4). A

purely hedonistic character, he thirsts after pleasure derived from wealth, body and others' interactions as a form of entertainment. Volpone is vice-like because of his use of disguise and his love of evil for its own sake rather than for any other cause (Dessen 78). Russ McDonald emphasises, "Jonson's concentration on unpleasantness helps build up a picture of human beings as subject to disease, illness and decay" (11). Through him, Jonson also criticizes another mortal sin, that of sloth, as he proudly states,

> Yet I glory
> More in the cunning purchase of my wealth,
> Than in the glad possession; since I gain
> No common way; I use no trade, no venture;
> I wound no earth with plough-shares; fat no beasts,
> To feed the shambles; have no mills for iron,
> Oil, corn, or men, to grind them into powder:
> I blow no subtle glass; expose no ships
> To threat'nings of the furrow-faced sea; (1.1)

Mosca, the parasitic "fly", is Volpone's part slave-part servant-part lackey and "his mistress" in his "a parody of a family" (Singh 5), is the crafty executor of his grand schemes. He expertly manipulates Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, feeding their hopes of inheritance with false promises. Driven by his own burgeoning ambition and greed, Mosca eventually turns his deceptive skills against Volpone, seeking to usurp his master's wealth. He views the deception as an opportunity for personal advancement and envisions a future where he escapes his subservient status. His growing independence and desire for social advancement fuel his treacherous actions. Mosca's soliloquy in Act III reveals his increasing self-awareness and his perception of the world as populated by parasites and sub-parasites,

> Your parasite is a most precious thing,
> Dropt from above, not bred among'st clods, and clod-poles, here on earth.
> I muse the mysterie was not made a science,
> It is so liberally profest! (3.1)

As Alan Dessen further, says:

> Mosca is the true vice of the play, because the parasite manages most of the intrigues, reminds the audience continually of his
> function, lakes occasional slips of tongue, develops a reputation
> for truth and honesty, and even moralizes occasionally (79).

The legacy hunters, Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino, each named after birds of prey – 'vulture', 'raven', and 'crow' respectively – are each consumed by avarice and the fantastical prospect of inheriting Volpone's fortune. It is this greed that makes them an easy target of Volpone's schemes and Mosca's manipulations. Voltore is the smart knower of the twisted ways of the world. However, it is he who is ironically the most gullible as Mosca continues to play on his image as a worldly-wise lawyer. Jeffares claims that legacy hunters were commonly called vultures as they fed on the departed. Corbaccio, however, hardly knows the world around him as a deaf and blind old man, older than Volpone himself. His age makes him impatient as he disinherits his virtuous son, showcasing how he is open to showing his selfish ways. Corvino is so filled with greed that he changes his ways to inherit Volpone's wealth. His overprotective and jealous nature over his wife takes a backseat as he offers his wife to bed with Volpone in the thirst of inheritance. Rawashdeh states, "His uncertainty how to behave results from a basic lack of knowledge, which he tries to conceal by behaving conventionally as a gentleman*"* (5).

In *Volpone*, Ben Jonson has brought out the characters in three sets. The first set comprises of the "estates" or the legacy hunters, Voltore, the lawyer, Corbaccio, the older-than-volpone-himself miser, and Corvino, the merchant. Celia and Bonario function as virtuous figures whose behaviour provides a standard by which to judge the world of the play. The last set is Volpone and Mosca, who victimise both the "estates" and the virtues (Dessen 81).

The third set is of the virtuous duo of Bonario, Corbaccio's son, standing exemplary for 'good' and Celia, Corvino's wife, an eponym of 'heaven'. Celia and Bonario are depicted by Jonson as direct, simple, and innocent characters who narrowly and luckily escape the evil plots of Mosca and others. Jonson intended this portrayal to represent Virtue, akin to figures in morality plays that lack the captivating qualities of Vice. He emphasises that their moral virtue, not theatrical appeal, is what matters, especially given the tendency for vice to be more alluring on stage. Celia's simple innocence contrasts with her husband's complex wickedness and Volpone's deceitful role-playing, while Bonario's directness opposes Mosca's scheming and his selflessness highlights his father's

selfishness. Jonson also states the fault in these victims. He presents them as simply believing in the appearances put forth and does not try to question or doubt the motives of their prey (Rawashdeh 5).

## V. LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

Underpinning all these tactics is the skilful use of manipulative language by both Volpone and Mosca. They employ flattery, irony, and persuasive rhetoric to control others, often mixing sacred and profane language for dramatic effect. Mosca's language, in particular, suggests a devious intelligence and an ability to act swiftly and decisively. As Orkin states,

> Jonson endows his two knaves in Volpone with brilliant linguistic skills, and demonstrates their effectiveness within their own society... Mosca speaks deceptively to persuade Volpone's clients (40).

The playwright skillfully presents the follies and vices of the English society in the distant city of Venice, Italy, considered as the hub of decadence and moral corruption at the time. Italians in general were seen as sensuous, decadent beings, thanks to their extremely sophisticated culture, history of Machiavellian politicians and beautiful (and often erotic) love poetry. The characters' relentless social climbing and opportunistic behaviour satirise the social anxieties surrounding mobility and status in Jacobean England. Johnson was writing during a period of significant social and economic transformation, marked by the rise of a more commercially oriented society. The play reflects the anxieties of this era, particularly concerning the pursuit of luxury and the potential for wealth to erode traditional moral values. Jonson employs a double-level satire, one aimed at the conventions of the time and the other targeted at the lack of morality affecting early 17th century England (Karim 4). The play's initial popularity with its Jacobean audience suggests that its critique of greed and human folly resonated deeply with the social and moral concerns of the time. Johnson was "conveying an anatomy of the time's deformity through comedy" (Dessen 75).

The ending establishes a sense of poetic justice where every greedy character is punished in a fitting manner and rewards are bestowed upon the virtuous characters. This ending is achieved to further the purpose of the play, "To mix profit with your pleasure" (Jonson Prologue). Written to influence the English audience, Jonson restores balance of the presentation of Venice as the house of all corruption, also metes out due justice. As qizi argues,

> Venice's reputation for impurity is matched by its powerful system of government, and Volpone's disaster reflects not only Johnson's strong morality, but also the magnificence of Venetian punishment (1).

## VI. CONCLUSION

The satirical power of *Volpone* is significantly enhanced by the intricate interplay between the "tease" of deception and the realm of fantasy inhabited and illusion created by the characters. The play's pervasive dark humour and ironic situations further contribute to its satirical critique of human nature. Through elaborate schemes, disguises, and language present throughout the form, narrative, characterisation and setting of the play, Volpone and Mosca orchestrate a world where appearances are constantly shifting, presenting a scathing critique of the contemporary society. The characters' immersion in their own fantastical hopes and desires amplifies the satirical effect, highlighting the absurdity and moral bankruptcy of their actions. Ultimately, the play serves as a critical commentary on the social and economic values of the Jacobean era.

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