Volpone – Animal and Moral Monstrosity

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Abstract: *This essay examines the ways in which the concepts of monstrosity and the monstrous are dealt with throughout the dramatic interaction in Ben Jonson's* Volpone. *Whereas, on a first reading of the play, monstrosity and the monstrous are perceived as notions which relay to matters of animal-like physicality, of mere grotesque appearance, it is really the ethical ambivalence of its characters that formulates the suggestion that monstrosity essentially bears upon moral corruption. Greed, lust, dishonesty, jealousy are vices which relate to an understanding of the monstrous and monstrosity congruent to the Renaissance view upon these notions as a matter of psychological and moral deformity rather than a non-figurative medieval perspective upon the concepts. As a result, in Ben Jonson's* Volpone, *animal imagery conveying altered animal-like features merely represents an element of comedy which serves as an amusement trigger, in order to entertain the audience and achieve dramatic jesting, while moral monstrosity is actually a form of challenging the social notions of physical monstrosity of the period by opposing the monstrosity of the mind through monstrous exaggerations of the body. The human-like mental monstrosity is enhanced through animal-like features of the characters and their symbolic names. The beast imagery is wisely exploited with the intention of creating an evocative reflection of a lustful Venice and its felonious, immoral inhabitants. The motif of the medieval bestiary is accordingly employed by assigning beast-like features to almost every character who adopts the corresponding behaviour of the animal that gives its name: Volpone, the sharp-witted fox, a depraved hedonist; Mosca, the deceiving, unscrupulous parasite; and the three legacy-hunters, Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino—the insatiable greed-driven prey birds. The end of Jonson's comedy unfolds in a moralistic manner, where Volpone and the other legacy-hunters' mischievous nature is finally penalized. Their animal-like depictions—avarice, the continuous illicit chase for fast and easy money—generate the evil nature of the dramatic figures, which epitomize moral monstrosity.*

Keywords: *Ben Jonson, early modern drama, grotesque body, medieval bestiaries, monstrosity,* Volpone

This essay examines how animal imagery, conveying altered physical features, merely represents an element of comedy which serves as an amusement trigger in order to entertain the audience and achieve dramatic jesting. Alternatively, moral monstrosity is actually a form of challenging the social notions of physical monstrosity of the period by opposing the monstrosity of the mind through monstrous exaggerations of the body. What do the monster-like characters in *Volpone* demonstrate? Of what are they signs? To whom and for whom are early modern monster-like characters constituted as *meaningful* creatures? I argue that the mental monstrosity is enhanced in the play through animal-like features of the characters and their symbolic names. The porosity of the boundaries between what

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was arguably seen as "monstrosity" and what the society would consider "normal" is enhanced in early modern drama through the metaphors of the body during dramatic action. Distorted body and mind become significant realities in the world of the play, which, in their turn, are influenced by cultural representations of monstrosity drawing on classical and early modern discourses.

Vices displayed during the dramatic interaction in *Volpone* are mental monstrosities that affect most characters, while the animal imagery highlights the parasite symbolism of the play, which indicates how one life-form feeds on another. By examining the rhetoric of animalization in *Volpone,* the audiences are compelled to determine which attributes actually represent the definition of the monstrous. Is the animalistic allusion a direct designation for monstrosity? Or is it covertly implied that there is a significant shift of monstrosity in Jonson's play, from a medieval physically-deformed understanding of bestiality to a reflection upon the moral nature of the nobility in Venice? Hence, audiences are made to glimpse the contrasts between the picture-perfect Venetian civility and its actual beast-like immorality.

The connection to Aesop's fable of the fox, which shrewdly tricks the crow into dropping its cheese, is evident in *Volpone,* being referred to several times during the dramatic interaction. The play's Prologue speaks of "our poet" (Prologue 5) who "makes jests to fit his fable" (Prologue 28).[1] The "fable" may be a moralizing story, in the manner of Aesop's fables, but it also signifies the products of imagination. This is a meta-theatrical element that links the world of the play with issues of authorship and self-mirroring effects. In following this fictional poet's actions, the Prologue says that it took the poet five weeks to fully pen the playscript, "From his own hand, without a coadjutor, / Novice, journeyman, or tutor" (Prologue 16-17). The originality of the play is, therefore, incontestable, as attested by the text itself. This self-reflexivity is important in shaping the questions raised about the effects of monstrosity in the comedy. The Prologue calls the play "this his creature" (Prologue 12)—a creature engendered by the poet's imagination—which suggests "[a] created thing or being; a product of creative action; a creation" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Therefore, the relation to the creative aspect of playwriting is clearly delineated from the start. The Prologue invites the audience "to stop the gaps" in the poet's "loose writing" (Prologue 24), and so determine him to be more coherent. The aggressive emendation of the dramatic text by the audience is expected to occur "With such a deal of monstrous and forced action" (Prologue 25) that it may be similar to the activity in "Bedlam" (Prologue 26).[2] This self-critical note that Ben Jonson inserts,

[1] References to Ben Jonson's *Volpone* are keyed to *Ben Jonson: Three Comedies*, edited by Michael Jamieson (1985). All references to act, scene, and lines are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

[2] According to Edward Sugden's *Topographical Dictionary*, Bedlam was a medieval priory which "was soon used as a hospital, and in 1402 was specially appropriated to lunatics" (53). Therefore, the allusion to Bedlam as a medieval and early modern madhouse in London, in the Prologue of Jonson's

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which refers to his own writing, demonstrates that the "monstrous and forced action" of satire can have positive effects in the world of the theatre: to amend the vices represented through the characters.

The image of the grotesque body in literature has been discussed by many critics, starting with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body. In the chapter "The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources" in *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin argues that gross exaggerations and hyperbole in literary texts are "fundamental attributes of the grotesque style" (303) and "grotesque imagery constructs what we may call a double body" (318). As Bakhtin cogently argues,

> We find at the basis of grotesque imagery a special concept of the body as a whole and of the limits of this whole. The confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn in the grotesque genre quite differently than in the classic and naturalist images. (315)

I want to point out the idea of "difference" between the depiction of the body in the grotesque genre as opposed to classical images. This idea is applicable to Ben Jonson's *Volpone* from the beginning, because the Prologue makes the difference between other plays (by Ben Jonson or his contemporaries) and this particular comedy. As the Prologue states, the play "presents quick comedy refined" (Prologue 29); although the play observes the classical unities, of time, place, and character (Prologue 31),[3] the poet will "rub your cheeks" with salt till they become "red with laughter" (Prologue 35). The grotesque picture of people's red and bloated cheeks demonstrates that images of monstrosity trigger not only negative connotations, but they may provoke the audience to introspection. A fatty monster-like creature with red cheeks can be as funny as the fox-like character who cons the gullible citizens of Venice.

The beast-like imagery is exploited in the play to create an evocative reflection of a lustful Venice and its felonious, immoral inhabitants. In *Volpone: A Critical Guide*, edited by Matthew Steggle, Matthew C. Hansen draws our attention to the fact that audiences would have to choose between understanding Jonson's characters to be essentially human, infused with certain animal characteristics as

Volpone, is in accordance with the entire play's meta-theatrical self-referentiality. Just as the patients in the madhouse, the play's "poet" is considered rather mad because he used figures of bestiaries in the dramatic action. Consequently, the audience are invited to amend this fact by "monstrous and forceful action" (Prologue 25). Monstrosity, therefore, can be corrective and creative, through satire, rather than demeaning.

[3] As David Bevington observes in *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, "Jonson commits himself to limiting his dramatic action to a period roughly of twenty-four hours and to a single location (Venice), so that the spectators' credulity will not be stretched by having to imagine that the stage represents several distinct places, or that a character is supposed to age before the spectators' eyes from a young to an old person" (73).

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indicated by their names, or they could be perceived as "talking animals" (Hansen 173). Hansen goes even further, launching the question: "Which dynamic—animalistic humans or humanistic animals—is more threatening?" (173). The motif of the medieval beast-play is accordingly employed by assigning animal-like features to almost every character who adopts the corresponding behaviour of the animal that gives its name. Volpone is the sharp-witted fox, a depraved hedonist, who manages to cunningly deceive Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, at least in the beginning, but who eventually becomes a victim of his own monstrous mental deformity. Mosca is the unscrupulous master of disguise, a parasite whose only worth is obeying and fulfilling his master's corrupt orders and who ultimately adds disloyalty and perfidy to his array of moral flaws. Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino are legacy-hunters who crave for Volpone's money and incessantly try to act deludingly in order to lay hands on Volpone's fortune. The only character who lacks any animal-featured behaviour, or other name-alluded attributes, is the virtuous Celia. While not portraying any grotesque creature-like element, Celia however impersonates the objectified female.

There are two significant readings when referring to the animal imagery in the play. In his introduction to *Volpone: A Critical Guide*, Matthew Steggle draws attention to the fact that *Volpone* is an "oddity" (1) in the Ben Jonson canon because of the fact that it lacks "much of Jonson's characteristic interest in money and wealth" (1). While this seems a strange thing to say, because riches are so obviously central to the play, in *Volpone*, as Steggle argues,

> money is interesting because it has a double nature: it is simultaneously the tool required for a competitive display necessary to exercise social power, and also the tool required to keep starvation at arm's length. That doubleness is what makes it slippery and fascinating. (2)

This paradoxical statement of the "doubleness" encountered in *Volpone* can be applied to the play's delineation of monster-like characters. While the characters bear animal names and display beastly moral features, it is uncertain which elements prevail. It is this doubleness, also observed by Bakhtin (318) in his analysis of the grotesque that, as I argue, informs the representations of the monstrous body in *Volpone*. While representing ordinary human beings evolving in the highly civilized milieu of early modern cosmopolitan Venice, the play re-creates grotesque bodies whose animal-like features are neither here nor there, neither beastly nor human. In the language of the theatre, the monstrous body is both spiritual and earthly, both human and animal.

Monsters in early modern culture are threshold figures that inhabit the porous boundaries between science and imagination, between public and private. In the study entitled *Monsters and Their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic*

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(2011), Wes Williams points out the connection between human imagination and representations of monsters:

> Figures both of and for the imagination, early modern monsters show forth concerns and connections otherwise concealed by the institutional structures which governed daily life: those of the family, of colour, caste, and state politics, and of genre. (14)

Just as other discourses in early modern times, Ben Jonson's theatre responded to the social meanings attributed to monsters, but the play creates a different kind of monsters. Drawing on early modern interpretations of monstrosity and the monster, the beasts in *Volpone*, similarly to other dramatic representations of the same period, are no longer notions that refer to the physically deformed portrayals of characters but, on the contrary, it is the mental and moral corruption of the dramatic figures that embodies human corrupt nature, which resembles animalistic behaviour and acquires grotesque attributes.

Volpone, an Italian equivalent for "fox," is the protagonist of the play, an allegedly sick wealthy nobleman who, similarly to the fox's shrewdness, tricks three elderly gentlemen into thinking that he is extremely ill, almost on his death-bed. Volpone's unscrupulous nature and deceiving personality helps him receive expensive attentions and gifts from these fortune-hunters. Volpone himself indicates the similarities between him and the animal that denotes his name. Not only does he wear "furs" (1.1.85; 1.2.97) and talks as a canny, sly fox, but he actually alludes to Aesop's moralistic text through his own suggestive discourse: "[...] and not a Fox / Stretched on the earth, with fine delusive sleights / Mocking a gaping Crow—ha, Mosca?" (1.1.94-96). In this conversation, Mosca (the Fly) is not only Volpone's interlocutor and the parasite privy to his con-art manipulations, but he is also an alter-ego of the sly character, cunningly involved in staging the tricks for the gullible and greedy target-monsters. Negativity does not have any effect on the cunning fox-like creatures, as Volpone wisely tells Mosca: "The Fox fares ever best when he is cursed" (5.3.119). Challenges and aggressivity are incentives for provocative behaviour, according to Volpone.

The identity between Volpone's character and that of the proverbial fox is not perfectly overlapping, and Aesop's fable is again brought into discussion. When, at the end, Volpone is faced with his gulled victims, he still has the strength to mock them, implying that Corvino should not have dropped his assets before seeing his interests accomplished:

> A witty merchant, the fine bird Corvino,
> That have such moral emblems on your name,
> Should not have sung your shame, and dropped your cheese,

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To let the Fox laugh at your emptiness. (5.7.11-14)

This is a direct reference to Aesop's fable, in which the raven (in Italian, Corvino) dropped the cheese it was holding in its mouth when trying to sing, in response to the fox's flattery, thus letting the fox have its bite.

Aesop's fable is used as a warning against listening to flattery. In the 1595 English prose translation of Aesop's fables, translated by William Caxton, in the fable entitled "Of the Rauen and the Fox," the moral of the story is clearly set from the beginning: "They that be glad and joyfull of the praysing of flatterers, often times they repent them, whereof Esope rehearseth to us such a Fable" (Aesop 74). Flattery means temptation on the part of the flatterer and vanity on the part of the person being flattered. Flattery is a moral weakness and it shows lack of virtue, which is one of the highest manifestations of human reason. Similar to the animalistic lack of ethics and morality, Volpone intently acts mischievously and unscrupulously in order to satiate his desires, including seducing or even trying to rape Celia. His monstrous depiction is mentally and morally enhanced by the animalistic reminiscence of his name. Volpone uses his corrupt wealth for hedonist indulgences, while greatly praising his laziness and deceiving skills. He asks Mosca to prepare him "music, dances, banquets, all delights; / The Turk is not more sensual in his pleasures / Than will Volpone" (1.5.87-89). Volpone heartily enjoys the riches he has received from his gulls: "a pearl! / A diamond! Plate! Chequins!" (1.5.89-90), which Corbaccio and Corvino had let fall in his lap, via Mosca. Volpone's enjoyment of sensual pleasures—which he compares to the Ottoman Sultan's delights—is part of his beast-like amoral nature. Volpone admits that enjoying riches is "better than rob churches" (1.5.91) or "eating once a month a man" (1.5.92). Extremely sinful activities, such as cannibalism, are shown as part of Volpone's amoral attitude, according to which nothing can be blameful or shameful.

Volpone is an Epicurean addicted to self-gratification and he totally disregards ethical values. He worships "gold" (1.1.2) and "sacred treasure" (1.1.13) with "adoration" (1.1.12) as his sole religion, his only "[D]ear saint" (1.1.21), and he reflects that the gold he worships is

The price of souls; even hell […]
Is made worth heaven! Thou art virtue, fame,
Honour, and all things else. Who can get thee,
He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise – (1.1.24-27)

Thus, it is not so much the menace of the animal that startles the audience, but the beastly moral monstrosity which truly appals. Considering what is funny in *Volpone*, Rick Bowers observes:

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> Volpone represents a character at once out of control in terms of moral intelligence, but radically in control of amoral situational intelligence. He asserts all the energies of the joker, grouch and scapegrace—a figure at once ethically void and yet constantly registering his ethical stance even as he is appalled by the unethical extremes of others. (106)

Indeed, rather than being horrified by his worshipping of gold and his lack of morals in duping others, Volpone is a trickster with a mission: he behaves immorally but his depraved conduct helps reveal the faults in others. While acting as an irrational animal—in total ignorance and disregard of human moral laws—Volpone is, in fact, provoking the gulled characters to behave in a similar manner.

In spite of his sly nature, Volpone displays human gullibility, as he is shrewdly conned by his seemingly most loyal servant, Mosca. His blind trust and dependence on Mosca are evidenced by his affectionate discourse. Volpone calls Mosca "divine" (1.5.83), "loving" (1.2.122), "belovèd" (1.1.30), "sweet" (1.3.48), or "good" (1.2.66), revealing how his evil nature is cleverly outgrown through Mosca's delusive behaviour. Resembling the moralistic fable, Volpone's and the other legacy-hunters' mischievous nature is finally penalized. As the First Avocatore concludes educationally:

> Let all that see these vices thus rewarded,
> Take heart, and love to study'em. Mischiefs feed
> Like beasts, till they be fat, and they bleed. (5.12.149-151)

This final symbolic simile of the play illustrates—through beast-like comparison—the rebound effects that evil and vice have on human nature, emphasising the grotesque elements which epitomize moral perversion. Avarice and the continuous illicit chase for fast and easy money generates the evil nature of the animal-like dramatic figures. Moreover, the moral of the story is the moral of the play, because it is a warning addressed to the audiences, who can "see" (5.12.149) and "study" (5.12.150), or analyse, the beastly vices unfolding before them.

Another character that displays immoral, beast-like characteristics is Mosca, Volpone's misleadingly most loyal servant, a parasite who initially seems to have no independent judgement. Apparently, he blindly executes his master's immoral orders, but secretly, he is also monstrously greed-driven and deceitfully plots against Volpone. Mosca's traitorous nature is well disguised through flattery and servile discourse, displaying his false praise for Volpone. After describing horribly inhuman actions, such as tearing forth the fathers of poor families out of their beds and sending them to prison, Mosca observes that Volpone's "sweet nature doth abhor these courses" (1.1.48). In a display of dramatic irony, Mosca continues to describe Volpone's apparent moral qualities: "You are not like the thresher that doth stand /

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With a huge flail, watching a heap of corn, / And, hungry, dares not taste the smallest grain" (1.1.53-55); this means that Mosca thinks Volpone is not a miser who amasses fortunes and refuses to enjoy them. Next, Mosca makes a comparison related to Venetian commerce: "Nor like the merchant, who hath filled his vaults / With Romagnia and rich Candian wines, / Yet drinks the lees of Lombard vinegar" (5.1.57-59). This spatial metaphor, which shows the extent of Venetian commerce (the Italian provinces of Romagna and Lombardy, but also Candia, or the island of Crete[4]) is meant to be flattering in showing that Volpone is not a miser and knows how to enjoy the pleasures of life. Mosca's conclusion about Volpone's character is logical: "You know the use of riches, and dare give, now, / From that bright heap, to me, your poor observer" (1.1.62-63). What is amusing in this apparently laudatory display of Volpone's riches and his capacity of enjoying them is the negative characterization, alluded to by the repetition of "no" (1.1.41) "nor" (1.1.41; 1.1.57) and "not" (1.1.53; 1.1.55; 1.1.60). By emphasizing what he thinks Volpone is not, Mosca flatters his employer and tries to make him share his riches with him, Mosca, and the other parasites. In this scene, it is Mosca who is the proverbial flattering fox from Aesop's fable, while Volpone is the gull who lets himself be influenced by complimentary speech.

Mosca uses his manipulative flattery to ensnare Voltore, Corvino and Corbaccio as well. Mosca addresses Voltore in an apparently laudatory note, but in fact the adulation of the advocate is a negative description of the profession: Mosca says that Volpone admires "[m]en of your large profession" (1.3.53), who speak "contraries" (1.3.54) to every cause, and who "could turn, / And re-turn; make knots, and undo them" (1.3.56-57). The lawyer's ability to distort discourse and give "forked counsel" (1.3.58) is presented as a positive trait, but in fact these descriptions show the advocate's manipulative capacity, reflected, as in a mirror-image, in Mosca's skilful manipulation of Voltore. Similarly, when addressing Corbaccio, Mosca cunningly makes him think that every deceitful idea was the result of his own ingenious plan to inherit Volpone's fortune, and not the result of Mosca's shrewd persuasion. Corbaccio comes to think that the "plot" (1.4.109) was "Mine own project" (1.4.112) and thus he falls into the trap set by Mosca. Mosca also cleverly misleads Corvino into believing that Volpone chose him to be his heir, by telling him that the moribund Volpone pronounced the name "Signor Corvino" as his heir (1.5.30; 32; 33). The repetition of Corvino's name is suggestive of Mosca's skilful

[4] The Kingdom of Candia was the official name of Crete during the period when the island was an overseas colony of the Republic of Venice, from the initial Venetian conquest in 1205-1212 to its fall to the Ottoman Empire in 1669. According to Edward Sugden's *Topographical Dictionary*, Candia "came into the hands of the Venetians in 1204, and was retained by them till 1648, when the Turks attacked it and took it after a siege of 20 years" (96). Looking at the Cretan wines from the perspective of Venetian commerce is a geographic feature of the play that demonstrates the extent of Venetian wine traffic, from western Italian regions to eastern Greek islands of the Mediterranean.

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manipulation. In fact, Mosca is staging a mini-play in front of Corvino by repeating vividly the presumed dialogue that took place between the apparently dying Volpone and his servant.

Mosca's name is indicative of his dishonest nature and deceitful discourse. Mosca is the Italian equivalent for fly, an insect which has a parasite existence and this feature highlights his bloodsucking duplicitous reputation. As Stella Achilleos concludes about the character of Mosca, "[h]e proves to be an "acute reader of those around him" (150) and he has an "acute insight into other characters" (162), being able to manipulate through constant fawning and Machiavellian strategies. Mosca initially conceals his true treacherous nature from Volpone and the audience, displaying well-hidden lying abilities and the cleverness to slyly manipulate all three legacy-hunters. Yet this manipulative attitude is not so contemptible as one might expect. As Sam Thompson observes about the two characters, "[a]t least temporarily, Volpone and Mosca evade interpretation in moral terms, as their carnivalesque energy tugs against the condemnation they inspire" (22). Indeed, because they are funny but grotesque, and display human weaknesses, the two characters' monstrous traits and manipulative energy cannot be entirely detestable. They evolve in the world of the play as ordinary human beings do, and audiences may even forget that they have animal or insect names and are supposed to be part of a moral fable. Dramatic irony makes Volpone and Mosca almost likeable characters—were it not for the fact that they display vividly grotesque traits that make them similar to what was believed to be the characteristics of beasts devoid of reason.

Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino represent the scavengers, Volpone's wealth predators. Each of them does his best to live up to his name: lawyer Voltore is the vulture, elderly gentleman Corbaccio is the raven, and merchant Corvino is the crow. Their beast-like connection is clearly evidenced through Volpone's references in animal language, when he speaks in an aside about his clients:

> Now, now, my clients
> Begin their visitation! Vulture, kite,
> Raven, and gorcrow, all my birds of prey,
> That think me turning carcass, now they come. (1.2.87-90)

Carrion birds are symbolic of despicable character because they feed on corpses. As Volpone says, since the predators think he is turning into a "carcass" (1.2.90), the dead body of an animal, he might as well prepare the stage for them and play the moribund victim. When Voltore leaves the setting of Volpone's enactment of illness, and Corbaccio is about to enter, Volpone declares: "The vulture's gone, and the old raven's come" (1.3.81). Volpone accurately characterizes these bird-like creatures, emphasising their greediness and concurrent gullible nature.

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The three avarice-driven villains credulously try, one after another, to lay hands on Volpone's prosperity, similarly to how birds of prey feed on carrion, overlooking the fact that what they actually achieve is adding to Volpone's wealth. They are so greed-blinded that each of them is willing to offer expensive gifts, or to make surprising compromises, in order to become Volpone's only heir. Corvino's insatiability, for instance, culminates with his decision to offer Volpone his most guarded possession, his wife Celia. While he is jealous of his wife looking out of the window to a "prating mountebank" (2.5.2)—who is actually Volpone in disguise—Corvino sends Celia to sleep with Volpone. He acts on Mosca's sly suggestion that this is the medical recommendation given to Volpone as a last resort (2.5.34-35), to avoid his imminent death. Corvino orders Celia to wear her best gown and jewels and accompany him to a feast "at old Volpone's" (2.7.17) to prove that he is "free from jealousy or fear" (2.7.17). Mosca's persuasive deceit determines Corvino to disregard his fierce jealously and he willingly offers Celia in exchange of the legacy. While fear is an animal instinct, jealousy is a human emotion that makes people behave like animals. Whatever his emotions, Corvino is willing to exchange present wealth and wife for the promised illusion of grandeur.

Comparably to a moralistic fable, all the depraved characters receive their punishment, which shows how their degraded moral values bounce back at them once the truth is unveiled. Volpone himself seems to have foreseen, since the very beginning, what greed can bring: "'Tis true, 'tis true. What rare punishment / Is avarice to itself!" (1.4.143-144). While Corvino is humiliated in public by being made to wear donkey's ears, Corbaccio loses all his properties in Bonario's favour, Mosca becomes a slave, Voltore loses his job for trying to deceive the court in his benefit, and Volpone is caged like a wild animal. The gulls receive these punishments because they have succumbed to animalic instincts. In "On Comedy and Death: The Anamorphic Ape in *Volpone*," Isaac Hui gives a discussion of the ape as an anamorphic figure (as an image of distortion and deformity, constantly changing shape, as well as challenging the audience's perspective) in order to conclude that the dwarf in *Volpone* is an important character that can be related to ideas such as imitation, death, and castration (137). Hui remarks that "within the centre of the play is a hook, with its image of distortion and compression" (141); this illustration hints to the fact that "Volpone becomes an image of distortion and compression in the end" (141), which Hui links to the anamorphic image. I would go even further in analysing this image of the hook to say that an animal carcass is hung on a hook, so this is a fit punishment for a human being who falls prey to animalistic impulses.

Last but not least, I would link the grotesque images of the animalistic body and the visceral instincts to the harsh sounds produced in the play, which are aural representations of the monstrous body in motion. There are onomatopoeic and metaphoric sounds, such as those suggested by the names of the characters themselves; incidentally, for instance, the cry of an aggressive fox, in nature, is

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similar to that of a crow or any bird of prey. There are also many songs in the play, such as Mosca's song about fools (1.2.66-81), Sir Peregrine's song about elixirs and drugs (2.2.114-125) and his song about medicines for the ailments of the soul (1.2.182-193), as well as Volpone's song for Celia, when he is disguised as the mountebank Scotto Mantua (3.7.165-183). Beside their purpose of lulling the audience into a false sense of security through the sounds of music, the songs in the play are acoustic symbols of deceit and human monstrosity disguised as beautiful harmony. However, there are also more subtle sounds, suggested by the animal imagery in the comedy. When Nano presents Androgyno as a person in whom is "enclosed the soul of Pythagoras" (1.2.6), an entire philosophy connected with metempsychosis and the harmony of sound and music is represented. As Nano continues in his long monologue about the transmigration of souls (in a mock-form of the Pythagorean tradition), the souls of the ancients passed on to animals: "ox and ass, camel, mule, goat, and brock" (1.2.23). This inventory of animals is spoken in the mocking manner adopted by Nano, the dwarf, so the animal names are accompanied by the sounds they make. This discussion about the Pythagorean theory of the transmigration of souls is by no means incidental, since it sets the scene for the development of animal imagery in the play.

The animalistic allusions in *Volpone* are not direct markers of monstrosity. Although audiences might expect metaphoric representations of monstrosity in the manner of medieval bestiaries, the play subverts these expectations and represents apparently normal Venetians, whose social behaviour configures moral monster-like characteristics. The transition from the metaphoric implications of animal-like figures to the sophisticated and complex social interaction is achieved in the play by means of exaggeration and loud expression. While pretending to take over the features of animalistic bestiaries, the characters in the play reconfigure a social reality in which loud gestures and strident sounds typify conflictual relations. Rather than being mere metaphors of animality, the comedy dramatizes covert relationships of greediness, hatred, and fear, in the resplendent milieu of commercial Venice. Like the sonorous beating of drums and trumpets calling the audience to a carnival, the grotesque moral interactions of the animal-like bodies in the play are triggers of conflicting emotions that show the ambiguity of absolute moral statements. The amplifications of the grotesque body in *Volpone* are strident and lead to the limit of exaggeration, creating an aural/sonorous effect. This is possible in the context of the physicality of the theatre, where the actors' bodies on stage are both real (in the sense that they reflect a physical personality) and imaginary (because they represent animal-like characters). The rhetoric of animalization, therefore, is both real and imaginary: while viewing loudly-speaking and monstrous characters on stage, audiences can imagine their metaphorical ethical equivalent.

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