

Volpone or The Fox

Play Summary

Volpone, a Venetian nobleman, has no relative to make his heir; he must name someone his beneficiary. Several rivals try to attain his favor by bringing the sick Volpone gifts that they hope will be returned tenfold. Mosca, a clever parasite to Volpone, encourages the three major gulls to give until it hurts. These birds of prey are Voltore, a lawyer; Corbaccio, an old miser about to die himself; and Corvino, a rich merchant and husband to Celia, a beautiful lady of Venice. Also naively competing for Volpone's wealth is Lady Would-be, the affected wife of an English knight, Sir Politic Would-be. After each gull is fleeced before our eyes, Mosca encourages Volpone to think of seeking a greater treasure than gold: the wife of Corvino. After a sensuous description by Mosca, Volpone resolves to see this paragon of beauty.

As the second act begins, Volpone appears beneath Celia's window disguised as a mountebank. Jealous Corvino drives him away upon discovering his wife in an upper window. While Corvino threatens his wife with closer incarceration, Volpone sings to Mosca of her beauty and his desire. Mosca hatches a plot to secure Celia for his master. He tells Corvino that the mountebank's oil, purchased for Volpone by Corbaccio, has revived the flagging health of the fox. However, if Volpone is to live on, he must sleep with some young woman. The others are seeking the cure for Volpone, and Corvino must hurry or lose his investment. Corvino wisely suggests a courtesan, but Mosca slyly rejects this plan, reasoning that an artful quean might cheat them all. Finally, Corvino offers his wife. He is convinced that she is safe, and Mosca is sent to tell Volpone the good news.

Act III reveals Mosca and Bonario conversing in the street. For some reason, Mosca is telling Bonario of Corbaccio's intention to disinherit him and inviting the son to witness the deed at Volpone's house. Meanwhile, Lady Would-be visits Volpone and nearly talks him to death. Mosca gets rid of her by saying that Sir Politic was lately seen rowing in a gondola with a cunning courtesan. Corvino arrives, dragging his unwilling wife into the fox's lair; Volpone, left alone with the shrinking lady, is not successful in his persuasive attempts to seduce her. Just as he is about to take her by force, Bonario leaps from his hiding place and denounces Volpone and spirits the lady to safety.

Mosca saves Volpone from the police by explaining the incident to the three gulls and persuading them to tell his contrived story in court. Mosca says that Bonario, impatient to see Volpone, discovered the fox with Celia, seized the lady, and made her swear that Volpone had attempted to rape her. The plan is to get an injunction against Bonario.

Act IV begins with the subplot of Sir Politic Would-be and Peregrine. Sir Politic is discovered entertaining his fellow Englishman with his naive understanding of politics. Lady Would-be interrupts the conversation and mistakes Peregrine for the courtesan. She apologizes upon discovering her mistake, but Peregrine leaves in a huff and promises to take his revenge for the affront.

At the court, Voltore succeeds in making Celia and Bonario look like lovers. Mosca persuades Lady Would-be to testify that Celia was the bawd in the gondola with her husband. Volpone makes his entrance on a stretcher to demonstrate his impotence.

All augurs well for the rogues as the fifth act begins. But Volpone cannot leave well enough alone. He sends his servants to announce his demise and waits for the gulls to come to claim their inheritance. Mosca is the heir! The parasite flaunts his knowledge of their wrongdoing to the birds of prey and they leave in despair. Disguised as a police officer, Volpone follows them to taunt them further.

Meanwhile, Peregrine, disguised as a merchant, comes to Sir Politic's house and tells the knight that the police are seeking him because he has plotted to overthrow the Venetian state. When Sir Politic hides in a tortoise shell, Peregrine calls in some other merchants to mock and humiliate the foolish Englishman.

At the court, the three gulls, enraged by Mosca and Volpone and the loss of their hopes, decide to tell the truth. They accuse Mosca of being the lying villain who created the whole plot. Mosca is summoned and arrives with another plot in mind. He will extricate Volpone from this predicament, but the fox must remain dead and he, Mosca, must continue as the heir. Volpone throws off his disguise and the entire intrigue is revealed.

The court sentences Mosca to the galleys; Volpone is deprived of his goods and sent to a hospital for incurables. The gulls are deprived of a legal practice, a wife, and a fortune. Celia returns to her father with her dowry trebled, and Bonario is his father's heir immediately.

THEMES

Greed & Corruption

The theme of greed pervades the entire play. It is embodied by Volpone, Mosca, and all the "clients." In his opening soliloquy, Volpone displays how utterly consumed by greed he is. In a sense, greed defines the major conflict of Volpone. Volpone's scam is born of his own greed and fed by the greed of his "clients." After Mosca compares Celia's beauty to that of gold, Volpone's greed inspires unconquerable desire for her. Because greed is all that he knows, Volpone even resorts to it as a tactic for seducing Celia. Ultimately, it is greed which causes Volpone and Mosca's downfall. Because they cannot agree to share the fortune in 5.12, Volpone unmask himself and brings Mosca down with him.

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.

Animalization

Animalization, that is, Jonson's representation of characters as their namesake animals, transforms Volpone into a kind of fable. Arguably, the characters are not as one-dimensional as their names might suggest, but their names are fitting, memorable, and, most importantly, descriptive. If the names of Jonson's characters can be considered predictors of their actions, then the majority of the play's action comes as no surprise to the audience. Combined with the Argument, the Animalization theme reveals the motivations of every character. As a result, the audience can focus more readily on the underlying meaning of the play instead of the how and the what.

Parasitism

Although Mosca is the foremost parasite in the play, Corvino, Corbaccio, and Voltore might well be considered parasites as well. Certainly, Volpone's entire scam depends on Mosca's keen ability to leech his clients, but if not for the clients' desire to leech Volpone, the scam would fall flat. Volpone, Mosca, and all the clients are, in fact, competing parasites.

Parasitism is an explicit theme of the play as it emerges from Mosca's soliloquy in 3.1. Here, Mosca expresses his opinion that parasitism is a universal guiding principle: that is, everyone is a parasite, but some are better at it than others. In the case of Volpone, this principle rings true. Few characters in the play act honestly; all seem willing, instead, to use any means to secure Volpone's fortune. They are all parasites, flies and carrion birds competing over Volpone's dying carcass. Only Mosca, however - the cleverest parasite of all - is fully aware of his parasitic status. Thus, arguably, he is best able to manipulate others.

Vengeance

Though it is sparingly present in the main plot, the theme of Vengeance is much more prominent in the subplot of *Volpone*. The story of Sir Politic and Peregrine besides being a warning to the English state, points out the ludicrousness of traditional vengeance. Peregrine, who only thinks he has been wronged, drives Sir Politic to leave Venice merely for the satisfaction of saying "Now, we are even" (5.4.74). If nothing else, this parable teaches us that vengeance is a childish pursuit.

Deception

Like greed, deception pervades the entire play. As a theme, deception has the effect of marking characters for punishment. In the main plot of *Volpone*, Jonson's sense of poetic justice is such that any character who deceives another is ultimately punished. Bonario and Celia, who never engage in deception but who are honest to the last, are exempted from punishment. Meanwhile, Mosca, Volpone, and the rest of the clients all get their comeuppance.

Knowledge/Ignorance

At any given time during the course of the play's action, no characters on stage know as much as the audience; they are all thus ignorant, though some are more ignorant than others. Jonson's extensive use of dramatic irony ensures that only the audience is fully aware of each character's situation. Not even Mosca, the master puppeteer, knows that Corvino and Celia will come to the door earlier than expected and that, as a result, Bonario will leap out and discover Volpone's scam. Jonson plays with the knowing position of the audience, inviting us

to consider their moral failings from an unsurprised position. Thus he equates ignorance with moral chicanery and knowledge with moral instruction.

This knowledge-ignorance dialectic develops the conflict of both the main plot and the subplot. Sir Politic, who epitomizes ignorance, and Peregrine, who epitomizes knowledge, clash in predictable ways. On the subject of the mountebanks, for example, Peregrine has his reservations but Sir Politic declares that "They are the only knowing men of Europe!" (2.2.9). And, however ironically, Peregrine is supposedly being instructed by Sir Politic in the ways of a gentleman traveler. Sir Politic and Peregrine's interaction might best be summarized by the maxim which says, "Wise men learn more from fools than fools from the wise."

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, Corvino, 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.

Gender 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.

Corvino and Volpone 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. Lady Would be, the second woman in the play, is the opposite of Celia. The play contrasts her marriage to Sir Politic Would be—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. 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.

SYMBOLS:

Disease

Disease symbolizes immorality in *Volpone*. Although Volpone regularly uses imaginary diseases as a comedic way to trick those around him, the descriptions of disease suggest not only a physical wasting, but a moral wasting as well. Volpone pretends his disease has made him lethargic, glassy-eyed, and deaf. As a result, the three legacy-hunters increase the intensity of their bids for his inheritance. The closer Volpone gets to death, the more complex his lies, and the darker his morality becomes. He tricks Corbaccio into disinheriting his son, and convinces Corvino to let him sleep with Celia. Arguably, the darkest moment in Volpone's morality is when he attempts to rape Celia. Readers will remember he first caught Celia's attention when disguised as a mountebank (medicine man), detailing horrific ailments and diseases only his imaginary elixir could cure. In this way, imagined disease foreshadows Volpone's loss of morality.

For his part, Voltore attempts to redeem his conscience by coming clean to the court about his lies. When he learns he may still be in the running for Volpone's fortune, however, he feigns spiritual disease—possession—so his truthful testimony will be thrown out. Voltore, like Volpone, uses imaginary disease to his advantage, symbolizing his loss of morality.

Venice

The city of Venice, the play's setting, symbolizes greed. At the time of the play's publication, English audiences had an incredibly stereotypical view of Venetians as gluttonous, amoral, sensual, and corrupt. The effect of Venetian culture can best be seen in the subplot storyline of Sir Politick Would-Be and Peregrine. Peregrine, an English tourist, comes under Sir Politick's wing as he attempts to teach the new arrival how to survive in Venice without losing his English culture. Sir Politick warns, for example, that everyone in Venice will try to gull, or take advantage of, Peregrine. His statement foreshadows Peregrine's transformation from a traditional Englishman to a Venetian through his somewhat cruel prank against Sir Politick, in which he pretends to be the police. As the seat of greed, corruption, and decadence, at least according to the prevailing prejudices, Venice was the beneficiary of years of stereotype in English drama. Italians in general were seen as sensuous, decadent

beings, thanks to their extremely sophisticated culture, history of Machiavellian politicians (Lorenzo de Medici, Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli himself) and beautiful (and often erotic) love poetry. Though not things considered particularly awful today, this type of decadence made English people wary of being infected with immorality, and Venetians were seen as the worst of the bunch. The direct influence of the "power of Venice" to corrupt can best be seen in the Sir Politic Would-be subplot, where the English knight Sir Politic "goes Venetian" and becomes a lying would-be thief. But the Venetian setting probably made the story more believable for most English audiences, signifying the fascination of the play with disguise and deceit, though also, perhaps against Jonson's intentions, distancing them from the play's moral message, by placing the greed in a historic far away place traditionally associated with greed, instead of right in the heart of London.

Animal Names/ Animalia

In many ways, *Volpone* is a retelling of the classic animal fable in which a trickster fox cons three birds of prey out of a meal. Jonson clearly depicts each of the characters in traditional fable roles: Volpone is "the Fox," or trickster, Mosca is "the Fly" buzzing around the other animals' ears putting plans in place. The three legacy-hunters—Voltore "the Vulture," Corvino "the Crow," and Corbaccio "the Raven"—flutter around the carcass (or soon to be carcass, in Volpone's case) stalking their next meal.

By highlighting the animal nature of many characters, Jonson emphasizes how inhumanely they treat one another. The moral characters, Bonario and Celia, are given celestial names without animal references. Just as fables leave readers with simple moral messages, so does *Volpone*—greed will lead to one's undoing.

There is a "fable" running throughout the play, through the associations the characters' names create with animals. It is very simple and tells the tale of a cunning "Fox" (Volpone in Italian), circled by a mischievous "Fly" (Mosca in Italian), who helps the Fox trick several carrion-birds—a vulture (Voltore), a crow (Corvino) and a raven (Corbaccio) into losing their feathers (their wealth). The animal imagery emphasizes the theme of "parasitism" in the play, where one life form feeds off of another. And it should also be remembered that fables are tales with simple moral messages, told for a didactic purpose. Though much more complex, *Volpone*, at its heart shares the same purpose, making the use of "fable-like" symbolism appropriate and helpful in understanding the meaning of the play.

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 health and excellent qualities, but also literally, as an elixir of drinkable gold was sometimes used as medicine.

CHARACTERS

Volpone (the fox) is the central figure of the play. He begins the action by his plots and intrigues, and it is the audience's interest in the manner of his downfall that preserves the dramatic tension until the final curtain.

Volpone, as the name suggests, is a trickster who delights in disguises and intrigues. His actions are complicated in plot but simple in the psychology of the character that executes them. Volpone loves to trick people into giving him their most prized possessions. When he has secured these through cunning rather than ordinary means, the value is increased in the fox's eyes. In short, his character treasures the chagrin of those he has cozened more than the wealth received as a result of the cozening.

There is excellent comic sense in the simplicity and single-mindedness of Volpone's character. His insatiable desire to trick people is characteristic of the figure of the fool. Volpone shares the same human nature as the lowly fools of his household. They are naturally deformed; Volpone is the cause of his own deformation. The plot shows his fall from the position of Venetian nobleman to the social position of a fool. Volpone's character flaw, the desire to trick people, has brought him to the final curtain. He starts out playing the fool and ends up by being one. He fulfills Mosca's prescription of people: "Almost all the wise world is little else, in nature, but parasites or sub-parasites." The play's title character is its protagonist, though an inconsistent one. He disappears in Act IV, seemingly replaced by Mosca, and is first an instrument and then a victim of Jonson's satire of money-obsessed society. He is an instrument of it because it is through his ingenuity and cleverness that Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino are duped and he seems to share in Jonson's satiric interpretation of the events, observing in I.v "What a rare punishment / Is avarice to itself." But the satire eventually turns back on him, when he becomes a victim of Mosca's "Fox-trap." The reason he is ensnared by Mosca is that he cannot resist one final gloat at his dupes, oblivious to the fact that in doing so, he hands over his entire estate to Mosca. This lack of rational forethought and commitment to his own sensual impulses, is characteristic of Volpone. He enjoys entertainment, banquets, feasts, and love-making. He hates having to make money through honest labour or cold, heartless banking, but he loves making it in clever, deceitful ways, especially as a means toward food and lovemaking. He is a creature of passion, an imaginative hedonist continually looking to find and attain new forms of pleasure, whatever the consequences may be. This dynamic in his character shapes our reaction to him throughout the play. At times, this hedonism seems fun, engaging, entertaining, and even morally valuable, such as when he is engaged in the con on his fortune hunters. But his attempted seduction of Celia reveals a darker side to his hedonism when it becomes an attempted rape. The incident makes him, in the moral universe of the play, a worthy target for satire, which is what he becomes in Act V, when because of his lack of restraint he ends up on his way to prison, the most unpleasurable situation imaginable. Mosca is the ultimate master of disguise. He is the person who continually executes Volpone's ideas and the one who comes up with the necessary lie whenever needed. The lie could be made in order to

save Volpone from the charges laid against him by Bonario and Celia or to convince Corvino to let his wife sleep with the Fox—either way Mosca seems to have no scruples about deceit. But his most important deception is the one he effects on Volpone and the audience, hiding his true nature and intentions from both the Fox and us. In the opening acts, Mosca appears to be exactly what he is described as: a clinging, servile parasite, who only exists for Volpone and through Volpone. In other words, he exists to serve Volpone, and all that Volpone wants he wants. This impression is reinforced by several cringing speeches that he gives, all in praise of Volpone. But in Act Three, we have the beginning of what seems an assertion of self-identity by Mosca, when he begins to grow confident in his abilities. But then this confidence again is left unvoiced, and Mosca seems to go back to being Volpone's faithful servant, helping him get out of the troublesome situation with Bonario and Celia. But it turns out that Mosca's aid in this situation may have been motivated as much by personal interest as it was by a desire to aid Volpone, for when he is presented with an opportunity to seize Volpone's wealth, he takes it. Mosca himself is possessed by greed, and he attempts to move out of his role as parasite—a harmless fly, circling around a great beast—to the role of great beast himself. But his attempt fails, as Volpone exposes them both. An interesting question is what significance his failure has in the context of the play and whether it is just punishment for his greed, his deceit, or his attempt to usurp the powers and privileges of the nobility and move above his social class.

Mosca (the gadfly) is a parasite; this bestial name encompasses the simple character of Volpone's servant. Mosca is only one step higher in the social scale than the three deformed fools of Volpone's household: the dwarf, the hermaphrodite, and the eunuch. He is socially deformed, a fellow of no birth or blood. Mosca lives by his wits; he has no possibility of advancement in the Venetian world, and he is therefore free of the folly of greed. He takes his needs from the treasures of others, and he takes only his daily needs. The parasite's freedom from the normal ambitions of human nature makes him a formidable judge of it. He uses this knowledge to mock the frailties of his fellow men, and his only pleasure is in his wise observance that, if he is not noble, they are parasites. It is only when Volpone's need for cozening puts the weapon of financial advancement into Mosca's hands that the gadfly tries to live by his own means. Mosca's sudden opportunity for gain makes him vulnerable to the folly of greed, which eventually pulls down the charming and inventive rogue.

Voltore (The vulture) is one of the three birds of prey that circle around the fox, greedy and full of expectation. He is a lawyer and consequently has a weakness for wills. He uses his legal knowledge to advocate injustice in order to possess Volpone's fortune. Mosca wisely fools this gull by employing the advocate's own tactics; that is, he tells Voltore the biggest lie and documents it with elements of well-known facts. Voltore is tricked by his own folly. He can, he believes, with quick agility, make the wide world believe that a lie is the truth. He fails to observe that he, as part of the wide world, might be cozened himself. Voltore is, like all the legacy hunters, named after a carrion-bird. In the case of Voltore, that bird is the vulture; for Corvino, it is the crow, and for Corbaccio, the raven. Voltore is the most pleasant of all the legacy hunters, for he is the least crass and the least obsessed with seeing Volpone die. His preferential status shows in Mosca's special regard for him: Mosca

tries to make sure that Voltore gets enough payment for his services at the Scrutineo in Act IV. But Voltore comes to regret his actions at the Scrutineo. Of course, this regret only comes after he has been denied his inheritance, and it seems to stem directly from his resentment at Mosca's leapfrogging over him on the social ladder. And when Volpone whispers to him that he might still get his inheritance, he stops confessing his lies to the Scrutineo and pretends that he was "possessed" by an evil demon. The verbal irony is that Voltore, in that statement and action, reveals his greed.

Corbaccio (The carrion crow) is old and decrepit, deaf, round of back, and very avaricious. Partially deformed by old age, this fool completes his transformation from nobleman to parasite by being tricked into disinheriting his son. The irony of Corbaccio's spiritual condition is wrapped up in his physical condition: He really expects to outlive Volpone and inherit his wealth! This comic character flaw is not physical blindness but spiritual blindness. 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.

Celia is Corvino's wife; she is also an important plot device. It is Volpone's desire that delivers her to his doorstep. Her presence there gives Bonario a chance to save her. Celia is defined by her self-denial. This makes her a perfect foil for Volpone, since her self-restraint exposes his complete lack thereof, no more clearly than in Volpone's attempted seduction of her. The turning point of the play comes when she says "no" to Volpone's advances, thus denying him the lascivious pleasures he describes in his seduction speech. Celia seems willing to do anything to avoid dishonor, and this makes her character flat and predictable, too ready to sacrifice herself to be believable. Her willingness to subject herself to Corvino's harsh dictates and abuse may make her seem more weak than strong. But she has an inner moral sense, (even if it is dictated by seventeenth-century conventions on femininity) indicated by the fact that she refuses Volpone against her husband's express wishes.

Bonario is the good fellow of the play; he is also sentimentally romantic. Celia and Bonario are foolish as well as innocent. They look at life in Venice through the eyes of lovers of melodramatic, romantic fiction. Therefore, they are not human beings who suffer through uncontrollable circumstances. Rather, they seriously misjudge the people they should know best because of their naive ideas about human nature.

Corvino (Crow)

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.

****Note: Add Virtues and Vices to the Characters as required from the list of Virtues and Vices already provided to you.**

Go through the summary of all the scenes too.

A few sample short questions:

Does this play Volpone have a positive ethical message?

The moral of the play is undoubtedly that greed corrodes the human soul. In Volpone, Jonson gives us an extraordinary insight into the power of money to destroy those obsessed with having it. ... Volpone, unlike those he so shamelessly cons, **has the ability to change his identity depending on the circumstances.**

What does the play Volpone say about money?

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.

What led to the downfall of 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. Victory, then, and excess of anything (especially wealth and pleasure) are corrupting.

What is the moral of Volpone?

Volpone is a powerful moral study of human greed, foxy cunning, and goatish lust. It is not the traditional form of comedy. It is a play that takes on the form of a comical satire as well as a morality play. It also adapts the features of a fable, and in that it strives to teach a moral.

Acknowledgement: Notes have been compiled from various open sources

