

Luxurious Laughter. Wasteful Economy in Ben Jonson's Comedy *Volpone, or the Fox* (1606)

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In the 16th and 17th centuries, London became an international centre of commerce. The trade in exotic luxury goods played a significant part in this process. In contemporary society, the taste for luxury and the economic, social and cultural changes it embodied were viewed with both fascination and distrust. The new shopping centres where luxury goods were on display were thus accused of corrupting public morality and damaging national trade. The public debate about luxury was in part conducted on the stage of the commercial Elizabethan theatre, especially in the new genre of so-called city comedies that portrayed, parodied and criticized social life in the expanding city. Ben Jonson was a master of this genre and his most famous comedy, *Volpone* or the *Fox* (1606), dealt with the contested issue of luxury. In contrast to many previous readings that have interpreted the play in terms derived from later liberal and Marxist economic thinking, this article analyses the theme of luxury in relation to contemporary economic and moral debates. I will argue that the play depicts the main character Volpone's taste for luxury and the way he acquires it as both morally and economically damaging for an economy such as the English one, which at the time was built on personal debt and credit and therefore heavily reliant on credibility and reciprocal social obligations. However, this lesson is complicated by the fact that *Volpone* itself was in fact part of the economic relations Jonson criticized, since it was a commodity – and, in the eyes of many contemporaries, indeed a luxury commodity – on London's thriving theatre market. I argue that Jonson is aware of this contradiction without being able to resolve it. Ultimately, then, *Volpone* is an ambivalent comedy intended to provoke reflection in the audience about their consumption of spectacular luxury both inside and outside the theatre.

Introduction

The trade in exotic luxury goods played a significant part in London's rise as an international centre of commerce in the 16th and 17th centuries. An important

milestone in this development was the opening in 1567 of Thomas Gresham's Royal Exchange, which quickly became a hub for the city's business and retail. In 1609, Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, opened a competing institution, the New Exchange, a two-storied building located on The Strand and boasting about 100 shops with a variety of exotic luxury items on display. These inaugurations and the increasing luxury consumption among the affluent classes sparked much public debate, with the new shopping centres often being accused of corrupting public morality and damaging national trade with their import of foreign goods.

The controversial urban luxury trade and the international market that fuelled it were central themes in one of the literary genres that dominated early 17th century English drama – the so-called 'city comedy'. One of the masters of this genre was Ben Jonson, whose comedies display a continuing, critical interest in the economic and social changes of his day. Thus, it was an obvious, if somewhat daring choice, when Robert Cecil commissioned Jonson to write a short play in celebration of the opening of the New Exchange in 1609. The resulting piece, which is now known as *The Entertainment at Britain's Bourse*, is an ambivalent appraisal of the new shopping centre as an unexplored 'newe region' full of fascinating wonders, but also a Protean space threatening to disorient and transform the exploring visitor.¹ In this article, I will argue that a similarly ambivalent, but much more reflective and encompassing critique of luxury is already present in Jonson's most famous comedy, *Volpone or the Fox* (1606).

Relatively little has been written about *Volpone* from this perspective. Instead, like many early modern writings dealing with wealth and power, *Volpone* is often described in terms derived from later liberal and Marxist economic thinking as a play dealing with individualism, alienation, and the rise of the rational, self-interested *homo economicus* of the capitalist marketplace. I hope to avoid some of the risk of anachronism inherent in these conceptual approaches by re-inscribing *Volpone* into the economic and moral debates which the play simultaneously addressed and shaped. To do so, one must take into account that the public stage and *Volpone* itself were part of the economic relations Jonson criticized, in so far as they were commodities on London's thriving theatre market. Jonson shows great awareness of this contradiction without ultimately resolving it. However, as I hope to show, this is exactly what makes *Volpone* such a fascinating contribution to the era's debates about the moral and economic value of luxury and the possibilities of comedy to address it through the luxurious excess of laughter.

Luxury in *Volpone*

Volpone takes place in Venice, one of the great centres of international commerce in early modern Europe. Jonson thus portrayed luxury as an alien vice, but his London audience would have had no problem recognizing in *Volpone*'s Venice an image of their own increasingly cosmopolitan trading capital. The main character of the comedy, *Volpone* is a rich *magnifico* – a nobleman – who pretends to be fatally ill. He has no family, so in the hope of inheriting his fortune, the merchant Corvino, the

old gentleman Corbaccio and the advocate Voltore compete for Volpone's favour by false flattery and expensive gifts – incited by Volpone's servant and confederate Mosca. Volpone, of course, has no intention of naming any of them as heirs – and much less of dying – he merely seeks to satisfy his lust for pearls, silverware and gold. The play opens with Volpone's homage to his treasure:

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!
 [Mosca withdraws the curtain, and discovers piles of gold, plate, jewels, etc.]
 Hail the world's soul, and mine!
 [...]

 ... O thou son of Sol,
 But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,
 With adoration, thee, and every relic
 Of sacred treasure in this room. (I.i.1-13)²

Perhaps Jonson remembered this opening monologue, when he concluded his *Entertainment at Britain's Bourse* with the line: 'And god make me Rich, which is the seller's prayer' (Ref. 1, p. 140).³ Volpone's worship of gold has a no less evident religious flavour. His talk of souls, adoration, relic and the sacred paints his greed as idolatry. This is in line with Augustin and Aquinas, who relate idolatry to a preference of sensual pleasures over the spiritual world of God. In the predominantly protestant England of Jonson's time, such idolatrous practice was particularly associated with Catholicism, the dominant faith in *Volpone's* Venice and in England's chief military and economic rivals, France and Spain.⁴

Volpone's idolatrous worship of gold is in essence a worship of luxury. Luxury had two meanings in the age of Jonson, and he plays on both. In the Christian Middle Ages luxury (*luxuria*) denoted excessive bodily appetites, in particular 'lust'. This was still the common meaning in Jonson's England.⁵ It is therefore not surprising that Volpone is quite a voluptuary, who is ready to spend a fortune to sleep with Corvino's wife Celia. This association between luxury and illicit erotic appetites also quickly became part of the popular image of the Royal and New Exchange.⁶

The other meaning of luxury stems from the Roman Republican vocabulary, where luxury designated an excessive expenditure of wealth, often associated with declining elites or unmerited people rising to prominence. As such it was distinguished from the 'magnificence' expected of those entitled to power and wealth (Ref. 5, pp. 84–86). This idea of luxury was revived by Italian humanists and would be familiar to a man of such classical learning as Ben Jonson. It therefore seems deliberately ironic to give Volpone the title of *magnifico* in Venice, an Italian republic often praised among republican-inclined English Protestants as the true inheritor of the classical Roman republic (in contrast to modern Rome, the centre of the Catholic church), but also a city known in England as the 'pleasure capital of Europe'.⁷ For Volpone precisely embodies the degeneration of the civic virtue of magnificence into the private vice of luxury.

Jonson thus offers the spectator several interlinked perspectives on his main character. There is a Christian framework associating luxury with idolatrous sensual

appetites, which is again linked to a stereotypical critique of the Catholic Church. And there is a political framework, which censures the pursuit of extravagant private pleasures for its disturbance of the social order and eclipse of civic virtue.

Now, the question is: how do we grasp this critical portrayal of luxury in its historical context? A critic such as Don E. Wayne describes the main theme of *Volpone* as a conflict between a 'traditional moral doctrine of social obligation' and the more modern principles of 'rational self-interest, [...] bourgeois acquisitiveness and individualism' involving an 'anticipatory awareness of the phenomenon of alienation in both the Marxian and existentialist senses of the term.'⁸ In a somewhat similar vein, Stephen Greenblatt sees *Volpone* as an estranged, secularized individual who 'has lost any immediate relationship to the order of the world', and 'is no longer enclosed in a web of sympathetic intercommunication linking all created things'⁹ Such interpretations run the risk of illustrating the problem I mentioned earlier of using concepts that are foreign to what they seek to describe. To propose an alternative view, we must take a closer look at the relation between luxury, the market and the social order in Jonson's London.

Luxury, the Market and Social Order

The English economy around 1600 was characterized by a chronic shortage of money. This was a hundred years before banknotes were first circulated by the Bank of England, so the value of money was basically the value of the gold and silver of which coins were made. The shortage of money was due to the scarcity of precious metals, but also to large state expenditures, a trade deficit and foreign exchange rates. This meant, in the words of historian Craig Muldrew, that the English domestic economy in Jonson's time was basically 'a credit economy in which everything was measured in monetary prices, but where money was not the primary means of exchange.'¹⁰ This network of credit was so extensive that according to Muldrew, the whole economy became 'a system of cultural, as well as material, exchanges in which the central mediating factor was trust' (Ref. 10, p. 85). If we return to *Volpone*, we see that his fortune is precisely built on a breach of the trust and reciprocity on which the credit economy of the time relied. In other words, *Volpone* is hardly a figure of bourgeois individualism or a liberal *homo economicus*. He does not do any trading, and he is not an egotist because he acts according to the rules of the market, but because he acts against them and the common good.

Now, this is of course only true to the extent that we do not consider *Volpone*'s extravagant spending as a way of re-circulating wealth to the general benefit of the market. But this would not be the general opinion at the time about the consumption of precious pearls, wines and meals consisting of 'the heads of parrots, tongues of nightingales, /The brains of peacocks, and of ostriches' (III.vii.201-2). As Alison V. Scott notes in her excellent reading of the play's luxury motive, this extravagant menu deliberately evokes Pliny's condemnation of the 'trifles' consumed in times of 'moral corruption and luxury.'¹¹ Jonson's contemporary, Michael Drayton, was one amongst many to complain about what he saw as a movement away from

contentment with English abundance towards the taste for superfluous foreign 'trash' (*Poly-Olbion* (1612), 16.348-58 (citation from Ref. 1, footnote 13). Likewise, leading Mercantilists such as Gerard de Malynes, Thomas Mun and Thomas Milles linked the national trade deficit to the infiltration of the English market by exotic luxury goods (Ref. 5, pp. 102–106).¹² Since they saw wealth gained by foreign merchants as money lost for the English crown, the purchase of such goods was not perceived as benefiting the national market, but rather as a damaging drainage of the commonwealth's capital and, as we have seen, as an affront to God.

In line with this critique, Jonson is careful to underline the international orientation of Volpone's desire, not only in his taste for exotic commodities, but also in his luxurious appetite for women. To the dismay of Corvino's wife, the modest Celia, Volpone thus attempts to seduce her by invoking an erotic cosmopolitan charade, where Celia will first appear as Europa and Erycine, and then

...in more modern forms
 Attiréd like some sprightly dame of France,
 Brave Tuscan lady, or proud Spanish beauty;
 Sometimes, unto the Persian Sophy's wife,
 Or the Grand Signor's mistress; and for change,
 To one of our most artful courtesans,
 Or some quick Negro, or cold Russian
 And I will meet thee in as many shapes (III.iii.225-32)

There is something dizzying in this flight of erotic imagination circling the globe in search of exotic arousal. The Protean space created in these lines echoes the disorienting 'new region' of foreign goods on display in Jonson's *Entertainment at Britain's Burse*. The imaginative pleasure Volpone takes in creating such a space does not correspond too well with Don E. Wayne's idea of Volpone as an emblem of 'rational self-interest' in the Adam Smithian sense. Instead, Volpone is portrayed as irrational. What characterizes him is not acquisitive individualism, but a lust for novelty, transformations and charades. He satisfies this desire through exotic luxury and the bedridden theatrical performance that earns him his fortune: the role he plays as an old, dying man for his greedy, presumptive heirs. As he says: 'I glory/More in the cunning purchase of my wealth/Than in the glad possession' (I.i.30-2).

It is this irrepressible desire for performance and deception, this insatiable urge to invent and play new tricks on his three visitors that spells Volpone's end. This is evident in the opening of the Fifth Act, where Volpone has skilfully avoided exposure and defeated his opponents. His servant Mosca sensibly warns him that 'Here we must rest. [...] We cannot think to go beyond this' (V.i.13-15). But Volpone does just that when he feigns his own death and installs Mosca as heir only to secretly glory in the chagrin of his visitors. This irrational move puts an end to his income and unnecessarily imperils him. Volpone here seems less of a rational *homo economicus* than a truly comical character at the mercy of a desire that drags him irresistibly towards his downfall. For when Mosca takes advantage of his new position to extort his master, they are soon both undone.

This ending teaches a moral lesson about the impossibility of standing outside or above social relations. For Volpone's final imprisonment is ultimately caused by his disregard for the personal desires and ambitions of Mosca, his indispensable middleman. According to Stephen Greenblatt, Volpone is a portrait of modern man alienated from a traditional social order. It is certainly true that Volpone disdains both the institution of marriage and the trust of his peers. But the play's ending reveals that Volpone's independence from social relations and obligations was an ego-fantasy that made him blind to his reliance on his servant Mosca. Because of this blindness, the master unwittingly teaches his servant the fatal lesson of deceitful role-playing, which leads the servant to imagine that he can take the master's place. Thus, Jonson not only condemns Volpone's fraudulence as a sin and a breach of trust. He also portrays it in classical Republican terms as a threat to the 'natural order' of a body politic in which the corruption of the elites spreads to the lower social strata, who then threaten to turn the social hierarchy upside-down.

A Moral Comedy?

Such a moral lesson spoke well to a time and place concerned with social mobility and the moral effects of modern consumer culture. However, the lesson is complicated if we take into account the stage from which it was first delivered, the commercial theatre of the Globe. Contrary to his contemporary, William Shakespeare, Jonson did not write for only one Theatre Company and its stage, but for a number of competing playhouses. Without any secure income, he therefore continuously had to assert himself on the literary market. A paramount testimony to the self-confidence with which this bricklayer's son did so, was his publication in 1616 of the *Works of Benjamin Jonson*, a publication often seen as one of the first instances of a modern author self-consciously presenting dramas written for the public stage to an anonymous public as works of serious literature.¹³ Jonson also often used the prologues of his comedies to praise their author. *Volpone* is a case in point. In its prologue, Jonson proudly claims that it had only taken him five weeks to pen it – without any assistance – and he favourably compares his 'refined' classical comedy with the 'loose writing' of other authors (Prologue, 24-29).

This self-promoting prologue is strangely echoed in Volpone's boastful opening monologue. As we saw, this monologue casts Volpone in the stereotypical image of a Catholic 'idolater'. Incidentally, Jonson himself had converted to Catholicism some years previously. Another parallel between the author and his protagonist is suggested by the fact that Volpone's scheme relies on the construction of an elaborate theatrical performance, staging himself in the role of an old man whose secret motivation is a joy in deceiving and manipulating, revelling in the imagined luxury of Celia dressed in extravagant costumes. Volpone, in a sense, is both the director and main actor of his own drama. If we pursue this parallel a bit further, we might wonder if there is not also a resemblance between Volpone's three visitors, who pay something like an entrance fee in the vain hope of getting a precious reward, and the audience paying to see Jonson's play – including the wealthy patrons on

whom he also relied financially. Certainly, both *Volpone*'s visitors and the theatre's were presented with illusions, plots and actors. And perhaps Jonson's audience and sponsors, like *Volpone*'s, were hoping for a reward. If not a pecuniary return of investment, then at least a moral lesson (which is all *Volpone*'s visitors get in the end as well). Jonson promises as much in the prologue, when he purports 'to mix profit with your pleasure' (Prologue, 8), thus recalling Horace's *dictum* about comedy's purpose to instruct and delight. What Jonson offers in return, in other words, is the play's moral lesson about the wasteful nature of luxury. But the wording is a little ambivalent here: 'To mix profit with your pleasure'. While the audience gets the 'pleasure', it is not so certain who will profit, and whether this profit really is a moral and not in fact a monetary gain – the gain, perhaps, of the author writing for the commercial public stage.

In this way, the play seems to acknowledge an ambivalent attitude towards the moral value of theatre and comedy. Such ambivalence is characteristic of Jonson, who often expressed doubt about the public audience's ability to appreciate the finer points of his art.¹⁴ In this, he was not alone. The public theatres of his day were often accused of threatening the moral and social order. The so-called Puritans were particularly hostile and vocal in their denunciation of the damaging influence of London's commercial stages. One common motif in their virulent critique was their view of theatre as a kind of idolatry. Thus, the pamphleteer Stephen Gosson claims in the notorious *Playes Confuted in five Actions* (1582) that since theatre was invented by the ancient Greeks and 'consecrated to the honour of Heathen Gods', it was 'therefore consecrated to idolatrie'¹⁵ So when Jonson begins his play by letting *Volpone* deify his gold, he also discreetly evokes this common idea of theatre itself as a place of idolatry that 'rauish[es] the beholders with varietie of pleasure' (Ref. 15, p. 17). Furthermore, in the Puritan imagination, theatre was a place of luxury in the sensual sense of the term. Gosson thus claims that public theatres in London – much like the Royal Exchange that he mentions in the same passage – 'are as full of secrete adulterie as they were in Rome' (Ref. 15, p. 28). In *Histro-Mastix* (1632), the Puritan William Prynne seconds that opinion, when he warns that the 'effect of stage-playes, is luxury, drunkennesse, and excesse' (1.6.7, cited from Ref. 11, p. 14). Finally, Gosson notes that London's theatres are gateways for a damaging foreign influence, because their plays draw on 'baudie Comedies in Latine, French, Italian, and Spanish' (Ref. 15, p. 15). In particular, 'many wanton Italian books, which being translated into english, haue poisoned the olde maners of our Country with foreine delights' (Ref. 15, p. 8). In many ways then, the Puritan critique of London's public theatres resembles the critique of luxury as sensual and commercial depravity advanced in Jonson's play. What are we to make of these parallels?

Well, Jonson was certainly no Puritan. His comedy, *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), is widely recognized as one of the most uncompromising (and funny!) satirical portrayals of what Jonson considered to be Puritan hypocrisy and antisocial extremism. But even so he evidently shared some of the Puritans' concerns regarding the social and moral effects of the burgeoning urban commercial culture. But whereas Puritans regarded the public theatres that first opened in London during the 1570s as

a symptom of, and a contributing factor to, a decline in public morality, Jonson hoped that his plays could engage their audience in a critical reflection on, rather than outright pious condemnation of, the meaning of the social and economic transformations of which they were all a part. Whereas Puritans, hypocritically in Jonson's view, often tended to think of themselves as an elect community on the margins or outside of society, Jonson recognized, although grudgingly at times, that his plays were also commodities that needed to attract customers. This is exactly what *Volpone* did with its quick-paced inventiveness, its sharp dialogue and monologues brimming with the imaginary exotic wealth of Venice. Hence the play's ambivalence. For although it is meant to censure luxury, it conjures it up with such vivid detail that it inevitably also creates it as an object of desire for the audience. Likewise, although the audience is meant to distance itself from *Volpone*, the play does not prevent it from secretly sympathizing with the resourceful protagonist. So, ultimately, the play self-consciously asks if its moral instruction will be learned in the midst of all its luxurious delight; if the play will convert the public into virtuous Celias, who resist *Volpone*'s advances – or instead breed a host of cunning, selfish Moscas. And this is a question that no one can answer except the spectators, who are thus provoked into reflecting on their own role as consumers of theatre plays and other luxurious delights.

Conclusion

When viewed through the conceptual glasses of Adam Smith's *homo economicus*, Ben Jonson's *Volpone* might appear to be an example of the self-interested agent of the market. But when viewed in the specific context of his time, Jonson's work is not so much a critique of the market, as a comedy about those who try to break the social relations in which it was embedded. However, Jonson was aware that his play did not only describe or warn against extravagant expenditure, but also played a part in reproducing it. This contradiction is not unique for *Volpone*. A similar, although less emphatically ironic, ambivalence can be felt in contemporary artistic takes on the financial crisis, such as Martin Scorsese's *Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) that struggles – perhaps in vain – not to lose its moral message as it indulges in images of Wall Street hedonism. One could easily take a Puritan stand and criticize this film for not emphatically denouncing the excesses of the financial elites it portrays – and many have done so. But instead of chastely abjuring the appeal of luxury in abstract terms or in the form of a moralizing lecture, Scorsese invites his viewers to confront their own desires through the luxurious delight of aesthetic consumption. In this sense, Scorsese's *Wolf* is the latest inheritor of Jonson's *Fox*, *Volpone*.

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