

# The Tragic and the Comic in *Volpone*, or *the Foxe*

by Fumiko Takase

Volpone, Childlesse, rich, faines sicke, despaires.<sup>1</sup>

In the "Argvment" prefixed to *Volpone, or the Foxe*, Ben Jonson thus gives a pithy picture of the hero, Volpone. "Childlesse" and "faines sicke" inform that this man, if he is one, is not allowed to have ordinary human relationships with the outer world, but ordained to be an intriguer, who knows how to use to his greatest advantage the incongruous between appearance and reality, which William Hazlitt asserts as the essence of the laughable.<sup>2</sup> And he "despaires." According to medieval theology, a doctrinal truth is that a man who despairs is a damned man and that damnation is relevant to the *poena damni* or the punishment of loss, by which man's intellect is completely shut off from the divine light and his affections are stubbornly turned against God's goodness.<sup>3</sup> Man's extreme unhappiness is preached to consist in this suffering of the damned. What is more, *Volpone, or the Foxe* might be, in a way, called an "infinite jest"<sup>4</sup> upon Volpone's death. Consequently, in it laughter is intricately associated with horror. This study purports to approach this phenomenon from angles of "Comical Satire" and the literary, moral, and theological conventions of Jonson's day.

Douglas Cole says that when "actions and ideas focus on problems of suffering and evil, drama enters the realm of the tragic."<sup>5</sup> It is needless to say that Jonson is the one that took the initiative in inaugurating the tradition of "Comical Satire" in English literature as "exposure by ridicule."<sup>6</sup> Satire, however, is an art of persuasion:<sup>7</sup> that is, it is to "laugh Men out of their Follies and Vices."<sup>8</sup> The satirist is to expose incongruity

between appearance and reality, exaggerate and hold it up to ridicule. The audiences are made to perceive the incongruity and measure their own conducts and ideas by it. This incongruity has been thought, since Plato's day, representative of evil.<sup>9</sup> Satire recognizes the effect of laughter as a social corrective of evil and should remain in the domain of comedy as "a dramatic picture of the ridiculous" developed from invectives.<sup>10</sup> Its purpose is neither more nor less than a pursuit of evil and suffering. Then, what is the difference between comedy and tragedy? To quote Cole's testimony again, it depends on "the mode of representation of evil."<sup>11</sup> "The mode of representation" is, in the main, related to technique—the action and speech actualized by living actors, the situation revealed by the actors, and the distance between the illusion of life brought forth through that situation and the real world—and to the dramatist's concept of evil which controls all of them.

When we study Jonson from a viewpoint of his concept of evil and mode of representation, taking into consideration his theory of *mimesis* and his well-known plagiarisms, we cannot go without paying due attention to the ideas and concepts of the philosophies and theologies of his day and the dramaturgical practice available to his comedies. "A play is not created *ex nihilo*."<sup>12</sup> It is well assumed that especially the heritage of the mystery and morality plays which survived until the eighth and ninth decades of the sixteenth century wielded their latent influences upon Renaissance drama, not to speak of Greek and Latin classics and their poetics—the common property to Jonson, Sidney and others. The craft cycles had been attracting a large audience as a dramatization of Bible stories and visible sermons on Christianity appealing not only to the ears but to the eyes. They were, in those days, still presented in London and in the provinces, according to the evidence of contemporary documents; performed at court, according to the evidence of the Revels Accounts; published for the sake of the reading public,

according to the evidence of the Stationers' Register.<sup>13</sup> It is not probable that young Ben Jonson did not get acquainted with these pageants during his pupilage at Westminster school under William Camden, because one notices certain similarities of emotion and behavior between the stock figures of the medieval plays and some of Jonson's characters.

Bernard Spivack and others group these religious dramas under the title of "comedy of evil,"<sup>14</sup> placing on it the basis of their arguments, for they deal, basically, with conflicts between good and evil, and evil characters, such as Lucifer and his descendants—Vice, are literally made not so much to be feared as to be scorned as clowns. They are persistent supernatural agents of evil and destruction and act but to their own discomfiture. The "comedy of evil" is, in essence, an allegory, a drama of the Fall and the Redemption, and, in one respect, a "Dance of Death" which visits Everyman.<sup>15</sup> The evil characters are all of a piece and commit the same crime. They are equipped with grotesque figures, base language, ludicrous gestures, and devoted to persecuting and depraving good characters—Jesus and his offshoot, Virtue, until they themselves suffer from the *poena damni* at the end. They are creators of action in drama as well as interpreters of the moral pageant of their own intriguing. They are fundamentally amoral and the only emotion they express is a passion of laughter, as a positive sign for absence of good, deprived from boasting of their own skill in tempting good characters into vices and exulting in their suffering.

During the Renaissance when the *dramatis personae* of Greek and Latin classics and figures of history invaded the "comedy of evil," the evil characters were made isolated from the realm of allegory, and plausible psychological motivations were needed for the exposition of their crimes. Besides, their laughter became complex, transmitted from mere scurrilous to satiric laughter and manipulated as the tool with which to attack their immediate contemporaries. In 1599, however, the Archbishop of Canterbury

and the Bishop of London issued an order, prohibiting the printing of any satires thereafter and requiring the works of Hall, Marston, Nashe, and others to be burned.<sup>16</sup> Jonson, along with Chapman and others, was compelled to search for a new form of comedy and physiological springs of human action, with impunity, during which process he happened to tumble upon the employment of "humour."<sup>17</sup>

Elizabethan moral philosophy often equates "humour" with man's inner disorder. It turns again and again to consideration of what are known as the "passions," the "affections," or the "perturbations," of the human soul, which are not necessarily evil in themselves, but may produce unbalance or disorder in man's spiritual constitution: they are frequently conceived to have connection with the cardinal humours of the body; that is, God has so provided that evil men should punish themselves through their "passions," or their own inner disorder due to an excess of one humour. The Elizabethan concept of "humour" is medical and at the same time moral. Jonson's doctrine of "humour" is closely related to the classical principle of the Golden Mean as well. He employed "humour," so to speak, as the instrument with which to create what Henri Bergson calls an "automaton" or "something mechanical encrusted upon the living,"<sup>18</sup> and laid a foundation for the tradition which has the posterity affirm that "Humour is certainly the best Ingredient towards that Kind of Satyr, which is most useful, and gives the least Offence; which, instead of lashing, laughs Men out of their Follies, and Vices."<sup>19</sup> It might be found well justified to claim that it is this "humour" that mediated between the "comedy of evil" and classics in Jonson and that lets T. S. Eliot distinguish the laughter of *Volpone*, or the *Foxe* as the "terribly serious, even savage comic humour."<sup>20</sup>

Jonson elaborates his idea of "humour" in the "Induction" to his *Every Man out of his Humour*:

So in euery human body,  
The Choller, melancholy, flegme, and bloud,  
By reason that they flow continually  
In some one part, and are not continent,  
Receiue the name of Humours. Now thus farre  
It may, by Metaphore, apply it selfe  
Vnto the generall disposition:  
As when some one peculiar quality  
Doth so possesse a man, that it doth draw  
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,  
In their confluxions, all to runne one way,  
This may be truly said to be a Humour. (98-109)

Here he defines "humour" as an unbalanced disposition and ejaculates, "O, 'tis more then ridiculous!" Likewise, in *Euery Man in his Humour* he puts forward and supports that what he has almost in view is not a mere temperamental unbalance but affectation—playing false to the truth of one's own nature and superimposing upon genuine oddness a hollow pretense and a more or less artificial craze:

[Humour] is a gentleman-like monster,  
bred in the speciall gallantrie of our time, by  
affectation, and fed by folly. (III. iv. 20-22)

"Humour" is prescribed as a monster under the guise of a gentlman—an unnatural creature; furthermore, it is brought into existence of affectation, which Plato affiliates to self-ignorance or loss of identity,<sup>21</sup> in the playwright's belief that ignorance is "a Pernicious evill; the darker of mans life: the disturber of his Reason, and common confounder of Truth."<sup>22</sup> As a consequence, "humour" mimics so as to cover up "loss of identity" and grows, fed upon folly. It is now possible for the author to reduce human mentality to "feeding" on the level of a physiological function that any beast makes. Thus, "humour" has become a convenient means by which to set a comic distance between the stage and the world of real life. In other words, when one of the human qualities is abstracted and enlarged to an abnormal

degree, what Edmund Wilson calls a "one-idea character"<sup>23</sup> — the image of "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" — is born: into this particular quality all the other parts of humanity are absorbed and lost, and the stage on which the *dramatis personae* in two dimensions — types — come and go detaches the audience's imaginative power from the realities of life within the range of normal experience.

In *Volpone, or the Foxe* the curtain rises with Volpone's hymn for gold, which signals that the world perspective on the stage is soaked in the humour of avarice. The Venetian Magnifico raises his gold worship to the realm of religion and "confounds hell in Elysium."<sup>24</sup> A fascination of gold acts upon him because of its power which is strong enough to distort humanity, that is, the power which estranges man from virtue. He boasts of his cunning and artistry in piling up riches through double-dealing. He feigns sickness and deceives those who are impatiently waiting for his death, in the hope of becoming the sole heir to his fortune. Indeed, the deceiver or the deceived, they compete one another in vicious intelligence, performing a comic survival of the fittest. It is not without reason that each character is ironically and justly burdened with an epithet revealing the reality of his animal nature — Volpone the fox, Voltore the vulture, Corbaccio the raven, Corvino the crow, Mosca the fly, and even Sir Pol the parrot. The "fox" is thought, according to Elizabethan terminology, to exemplify ruthless cunning as well as a Machiavelli. "Machiavelli," in turn, typifies the new natural man, for whom the end justifies any means. He is a "villain who glories in the serpentine convulsions, through which he pursues power, wealth, or revenge,"<sup>25</sup> unhampered by moral scruple or religious conscience. If Sir Pol, the foil of Volpone, displays a double meaning of the "parrot" and the "policy," "policy" is just the term for characterizing such a Machiavellian behaviour. Jonson's treatment of Volpone as a Machiavelli indicates to us nothing other than the emergence of a world where Volpone has destroyed

the established theology and morals by virtue of gold and inverted ordinary human values in terms of self-love and competition on the materialistic plane. It is only natural that the vulture, the raven, the crow, the fly, and the parrot should lay for an opportunity to devour the fox, but the abnormal situation in which gentlemen are mimicking animals at the cost of their human dignity presents an exhaustive picture of such a world.

The incongruities of that world, its "preposterously trans-changed"<sup>26</sup> culture and the monstrosity of Volpone are presented in visual form by the deformed figures of Nano the dwarf, Androgyno the hermaphrodite, and Castrone the eunuch—Volpone's misbegotten offspring, along with Nano's song on Androgyno's lineage, through transmigration, from Apollo, Pythagoras, going down the Great Chain of Being from God to man, animals, back into the Puritan the fool and finally to an hermaphrodite, the most blessed, violating both Christian and classic images. None of them is allowed to have ordinary relationships with the outside world. As "ugly" and "bad" are regarded as synonymous and at the same time ridiculous by the ancient Greeks,<sup>27</sup> so folly and monstrosity are equalized.

All the characters are set in such a situation as to be constantly demanded to choose between gold and the existing ethical values. They follow, unhesitatingly, the new religion as well as the command of their humour, fixing their eyes on gold: the father disinherits his son, the husband forces his wife to prostitute herself to another. "Honour" and "virtue"—fundamentals of Christian ethics—are made mere words as by Falstaff in his famous catechism on "honour,"<sup>28</sup> reduced to the lower degree of "things" such as clothes and gold, neither of which gets worse for wear.

In proportion as the dehumanizing process gains the field:

Wheresoeuer, manners, and fashions are corrupted, Language is. It imitates the publick riot. The excesse of Feasts, and apparell, are the Notes of a sick State; and the

wantonnesse of language, of a sick mind.<sup>29</sup>

Such a proposition is clearly actualized in Volpone's wooing of Celia by the emptiness of his words, incongruous between expression and meaning. He dreams of the mirth derived from sports of love through metamorphosis — changing appearances — in acting "Ovid's Tales." He totally rejects the sincere communication of love between two hearts and enumerates jewels and spoils of chase and net, luxuriating in the pleasures of the senses :

The heads of parrots, tongues of nightingales,  
The brains of peacocks, and of estriches,  
Shall be our food : and, could we get the phoenix,  
(Though nature lost her kind) shee were our dish.

(III. vii. 201-204)

The heads of parrots, the tongues of nightingales, the brains of peacocks and ostriches signify not only a denial of immortality but also false splendour composed of things unfit for food. A consciousness of the privation of their essential quality looms up ominously amidst the grandeur and soon overshadows it.

This drama is, indeed, so constructed that it carries, throughout, the images of two worlds — one based on the Christian doctrine and the Golden Mean and the other, a Machiavellian, a negation and bathetic parody of the first. This dramaturgic arrangement lets arise a peculiar sense of ghostliness and affords to give to the spectators a judgment of the situation different from that of the characters on the stage, for they are completely proselytized to the religion of gold and robbed of their human prerogative of moral choice. In their self-ignorance, enslaved by the humour of avarice, these automatons do not bear the qualification to penetrate beneath the superficies of action and recognize what is true. The mere presence of the bed and the furs of the fox convinces them that Volpone is dying. Their god, gold, is such that it is, at a sweep, exposed to its reality, "this dross,"



and Volpone's sumptuous house to "the den of villainy" by "a puff of wind." However, their humour has bereft them of an objective correlative between their passion and its object devoid of ethical importance. A plethora of humour is equivalent to insanity, and that insanity holds sway even over Venetian jurisdiction and nearly crushes down sanity and good.

The sham world, incongruous with the proper way of human living, moves in accordance with an order of its own and that order brings in the final *reversal* of action.

Mischiefes feed

Like beasts, till they be fat, and then they bleed.

(V. xii. 150-151)

It has been testified that monstrosity and folly are combined. In order to "gain a rare meal of laughter" (V. ii. 87), as befits the creator of all the mischiefs as well as the founder of gold worship, Volpone the villain falls into the same folly that he has so far ridiculed. His last and greatest hoax is destined to set the balance of nature right again. That is, he feigns death and thus loses his status, either as a Fox or as a Venetian Magnifico. Of his own accord he identifies his fake appearance with his hollow reality—loss of identity, both in name and practice. It follows that Volpone and his dupes get their most dreaded punishment—the unmasking of their evil identity and the sobering off of their insanity.

The audience, too, is no exception in suffering the same punishment. As the "Prologue" to the drama vaunts that, when rubbed by "a little salt of satire," the audience's cheeks "shall look fresh a week after," so another comic knave, Face's last plea to the audience in *The Alchemist* confirms this view:

Yet I put my selfe

On you, that are my countrey. (V. v. 162-163)

"Country" has two meanings—"jury" and "nation." It is implied that the audience may be there to judge his case, but that

it is also a "nation" to be exploited. We can easily discern that Face is saying to the effect that he and the audience are fellow citizens of the same land of fools and knaves since a "jury" is summoned from one's peers. Now we are persuaded and shocked into a *recognition* that we ourselves are sharing the condemnation of being labelled fools and knaves. The irony is more incisive than a regular satire in which "Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own,"<sup>30</sup> because we have felt the peculiar misery of changing sides.

After all, the unbalance in character caused by "humour," from which nobody can escape, corresponds to the limitations of man who never attains perfection. The despair and terror that we feel at the *recognition* of the incongruity between our appearance and reality—folly and vice—naturally belong to the field of tragedy. Jonson must have been busy measuring, exaggerating, and contracting that vital gap between the world on the stage and that of common sense, so that the upsetting of the coherence of man's living whole is well in process and that the audience's objective detachment still remains intact by pity and barely wide enough for Reason to work. "All falsehoods, all vices," Ralph Waldo Emerson proves, "seen at sufficient distance, seen from the point where our moral sympathies do not interfere, become ludicrous."<sup>31</sup> We are, in fact, awakened to the truth, with the aid of this satiric gap, that by Jonson all the characters are presented, by means of action and speech, as mad fools and that our discovery and theirs of their own affectation, mistaken choice and evil identity are not caused by some inevitable force which exerts upon them "from outside,"<sup>32</sup> such as Fate, but by the "mechanical operation of the mind"<sup>33</sup> brought forth of "humour" from inside.

"Humour" is made, in practice, an appropriate vehicle for creating the vital distance for the sake of Jonson's mode of representation of evil, because a man in his humour — "a man with a crooked mind and a hopeless bias"<sup>34</sup> — is a comic type,

after all, required to show just one aspect of humanity, avarice in this case, in a two-dimensional way. It does not need a profound psychological analysis, but, as Bergson insists, sanctions the comic writer to concentrate his attention only upon the superficialities of action. In Volpone's world of "things," human relationships are, it is so contrived, judged solely from the knowable. It is too callous to let in love or sympathy and the survival of the fittest becomes *the* principle. Sufferings of Celia and Bonario, the two good ones, unchanged all through, are butts of ridicule through such absurd epithets — "cameleon," "jennet," and "parricide" — as are loaded with images worlds apart from their reality. There are no hints for their future happiness promised. Volpone is punished at the end, but his penalty is accompanied by no suffering. As Volpone himself conceives, it is only the "mortifying of a Foxe" (V. xiii. 125).

Furthermore, suspicious of scurrilous laughter as Plato was,<sup>35</sup> and convinced that playwrights are teachers,<sup>36</sup> Jonson engages this objective distance and the dramaturgic weapon of "humour" to the full in his war against evil, the incongruous between appearance and reality, in the name of sanity and balance, so that we are brought into another more important realization that behind the comedy of fools lies England under the reign of James I or our contemporary world of disorder. The fools' insanity is, in its turn, the guilt of the sane and the responsible. We pass through the catharsis of terror at the force of evil, but we are never disturbed by pity which we experience at a "tragedy of fault" or a "waste of good."<sup>37</sup>

To add to this, because of this objective detachment on our part, the situation where Volpone is placed is totally abstracted from the world of real life and made an artificial one. In creating this villain, Jonson makes avarice a central and prominent feature, around which and in relation to which the other traits are naturally organized, and the author sweeps off all the action at such a rapid speed, that with his presentation of the surface

alone, he renders the hero capable of suggesting complexity, more dimensions, because Volpone, it appears, has implicitly two or more sides to turn towards the audience on account of his full-blooded eccentricity and triumph in the vitality of evil. However, his relationship with his victims is as abstract as a moral proposition, for it exists only in so far as they exemplify values he is bent upon destroying — virtue, love, and honour. He is enabled to express no other emotion than “I must be merry.” “Mirth is the positive sign of virtue’s absence.”<sup>38</sup> He dominates over his proselytes, preaching, “What a rare punishment/ Is avarice to it selfe” (I. iv. 142-143), only to confound himself in a trap of his own designing. Volpone is, in essence, a comic incarnation of avarice, the damned, and a non-moral existence, foreign to suffering, rejoicing in a “Dance of Death.” He and his intrigues bear no affinity to any one or anything except to the characterization of evil in the “comedy of evil” and its theatrical conventions. Without reserve we may call *Volpone, or the Foxe* a sort of Jacobean comedy of evil.

Jonson’s association of evil with the comic and his mode of representation of evil thus corroborate his close kinship to the medieval concept of the “universal Divine Comedy,” perpetuated by St. Augustine and others, presiding at the back of the mysteries and moralities. The idea arises from the theory that all being is ultimately good, since God has brought it into existence. Hence, it is only by virtue of a lack of proper being that evil can be explained. Consequently, if the nature of evil is privative, if evil itself has no true reality on the metaphysical plane, the manifestations of evil on the physical level can become objects of mockery, for they are in a sense a temporal and impotent delusion and a laughable degradation.<sup>39</sup>

It is, thus, justified that both Greek and Latin classics which define the violation of the Golden Mean as evil and medieval theology which elucidates evil as a loss of proper being exerted a great influence upon Jonson’s comedies with *Volpone, or the*

*Foxe* at their zenith. The medical and moral concept of "humour," in sober truth, welded the tradition of the "comedy of evil" and classics into what Harry Levin calls the "vernacular classicism" <sup>40</sup> into which Jonson's have developed.

Evil manifests itself in incongruity between appearance and reality—limitations caused by "humour" from inside—inherent in man, and man is doomed to live amidst evil and suffering. "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it," claims Christopher Marlowe's Mephistophilis (*The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* iii. 80). Jonson's philosophy of evil is, no doubt, nothing more or less than a tragic one, but his grasp of life and his theme of disorder are unfolded, by means of "humour," through a comic mode of representation, as a picture of endless incongruities. Life is always the reference point, for :

To those who have experienced the full horror of life, tragedy is still inadequate.... In the end, horror and laughter may be one—only when horror and laughter have become as horrible and laughable as they can be; ..., then only do [we] perceive the aim of the comic and tragic dramatist is the same: they are equally serious.<sup>41</sup>

## Notes

1. Ben Jonson, "Argvment," *Volpone, or the Foxe*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford, 1927), II, 58. All quotations from Jonson's works are from this edition.

2. William Hazlitt, "On Wit and Humour," *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London and Tronto, 1931), VI, 7-8.

3. Douglas Cole, *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Princeton, 1962), pp. 192-193.

4. *Hamlet* V. i. 203. Line references are to William Shakespeare, *Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, ed. William Allan Neilson and Charles Jarvis Hill (Cambridge, Mass., 1942).

5. Cole, p. 3.

6. Stuart Tave, *The Amiable Humourist* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 44-45.

7. James Sutherland, *English Satire* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 5.

8. Jonathan Swift, *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1939), XII, 33.

9. Plato, *Philebus*, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), p. 339.

10. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), pp. 15-16.

11. Cole, p. 4.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

13. Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York, 1958), p. 61.

14. William Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Oxford, 1956), p. 173, and Spivack, p. 121.

15. Spivack, pp. 64-65.

16. Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, 1966), p. 261.

17. Harry Levin, "An Introduction to Ben Jonson," *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jonas A. Barish (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), p. 41.

18. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York, 1937), p. 37.

19. Swift, p. 33.

20. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London, 1966), p. 123.

21. Plato, pp. 333-337.

22. *Ben Jonson*, VIII, 588.

23. Edmund Wilson, "Morose Ben Jonson," *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 72.

24. *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* iii. 63. Line references are to Christopher Marlowe, *Christopher Marlowe*, ed. William Lyon Phelps (New York, 1912).

25. Spivack, p. 375.

26. *Euery Man in his Humour*, Q1.

27. Aristotle, p. 19.

28. *I Henry IV* V. i. 135-143.

29. *Ben Jonson*, VIII, 593.

30. Jonathan Swift, *Works*, I, 140.

31. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Comic," *Letters and Social Aims* (Boston, 1883), p. 154.

32. Ian Kott, "Hamlet and Orestes," *PMLA*, LXXXII (October 1967), 303.

33. See *A Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, in Jonathan Swift, *Works*, I.

34. Louis Cazamian, *The Development of English Humor* (Durham, 1952), p. 323.

35. Plato, p. 339.

36. *Ben Jonson*, VIII, 643.

37. Farnham, pp. 297 and 445.

38. Spivack, p. 121.

39. Cole, p. 15.

40. Levin, p. 43.

41. T. S. Eliot, "Shakespearean Criticism: From Dryden to Coleridge," *A Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Harley Granville-Barker and G. B. Harrison (Cambridge, 1934), p. 295.



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