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LEVIN, H.
1943

JONSON'S METEMPSYCHOSIS

By HARRY LEVIN
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Ben Jonson often professed to be more concerned with men than with monsters.¹ Yet the chorus of *Volpone* is a trio of deformed servants — Nano, the dwarf, Castrone, the eunuch, and Androgyno, the hermaphrodite. If Mosca is Volpone's parasite, they are Mosca's "Sub-parasites." And their monstrous antics seem almost innocent, by comparison with the moral deformities of Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino. At intervals throughout the play, most spectacularly in the second act, they appear as the zanies of their mountebank master, and reduce his intrigues to their own level of absurdity. In the first act, after the expository monologue in praise of gold and before the introduction of the three fortune-hunters, they perform a limping jig, which only Volpone could find "very, very pretty" and only Mosca could claim credit for inventing.² Out of hand it is easiest to consider this scene an excrescence; a French critic would even call for its suppression.³ So painstaking a playwright as Jonson, however, deserves to have his intentions more sympathetically explored; more recent scholarship would look to this very episode for a statement of his theme.* In that case it must be admitted that the development is clearer than the theme, for the passage in question is undeniably obscure. I venture to suggest that this obscurity may be clarified by relating the subject of Mosca's interlude to the thought of Jonson's age — which was also Donne's.

Mosca's interlude has already been related to literary tradition. Jonson's commentators, always more sensitive to classical echoes than to vernacular allusions, have debated at length whether "*the false pase of the verse*" should be classified as anapestic, spondaic,

¹See the epigraph from Martial on the title-page of *Sejanus*; the prologue to the folio version of *Every Man in his Humour*, l. 30; the glance at *The Tempest* in the induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, ll. 127-132. Numerical references to Jonson's text are to the edition of C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, Oxford, 1925-1941.

²*Volpone*, I, ii, 63-65.

³Maurice Castelain, *Ben Jonson, l'homme et l'oeuvre*, Paris, 1907, p. 301.

⁴J. D. Rea (ed.), *Volpone, or the Fox* (Yale Studies in English, LIX), New Haven, 1919, pp. xxvii, 194.

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dactylic, or the *pes proceleusmaticus*.⁵ Actually it is a four-stress doggerel couplet, which had been one of the commonest measures in the old English moralities, and was to be the meter of the Vice's speeches in *The Devil is an Ass*.⁶ In the latter play it is a vehicle for bringing old-fashioned ideas of good and evil to bear upon the new commercial enterprises of the Jacobean period.⁷ In *Volpone* too, though somewhat more deviously, the play-within-the-play presents the point of view from which the play itself is about to launch its satirical attack. The classics, as usual, supply the ammunition for Jonson's contemporary satire. It was Horace, in the fifth poem of his second book of satires, who first coupled the beast-fable of the fox and the crow with the *captatio*, the Roman practice of legacy-hunting.⁸ It was Petronius, in the last surviving chapters of the *Satyricon*, who showed how this morbid pursuit might be organized into a series of swindling operations on a grand scale.⁹ And it was Lucian, in several of his *Dialogues of the Dead*, who sketched out the motives and cross-plots of Jonson's *dramatis personae*.¹⁰

The Lucianic influence has penetrated to the core of the drama. With the exception of a few details, which seem to have been gathered from Diogenes Laertius,¹¹ Mosca's interlude is based on Lucian's *Gallus*, otherwise known as *The Dream*. But Jonson, who had great Latin and less Greek, was most familiar with this dialogue in the translation of Erasmus.¹² It was largely *The Praise of Folly*, as Professor Rea has pointed out, which served as the intermediary between *Volpone* and Jonson's classical sources. Thus Jonson's dedicatory epistle to the two universities borrows whole paragraphs from the *Epistola Apologetica* of Erasmus to Sir Thomas More.¹³ The English comedy is more preoccupied with

⁵John Upton, *Remarks on Three Plays of Ben Jonson*, London, 1749, pp. 8-10. Cf. William Gifford (ed.), *The Works of Ben Jonson*, London, 1816, III, 174-175n.

⁶E. g., *The Devil is an Ass*, I, i, 44-53.

⁷Suggestive in this connexion is L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, London, 1937.

⁸Upton, *op. cit.*, pp. 18, 19.

⁹F. Holthausen, "Die Quelle von Ben Jonsons *Volpone*," *Anglia* XII, (1890), 519-525.

¹⁰J. Q. Adams, "The Sources of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*," *Modern Philology* II, (1904), 289-299.

¹¹W. Bang, "Zu Jonsons Quellen für seinen *Volpone*," *Mélanges Godefroid Kurth*, Liège, 1908, II, 351-355.

¹²Rea, *op. cit.*, pp. xvii-xix, 160, 161. See also C. R. Thompson, *The Translations of Lucian by Erasmus and St. Thomas More*, Ithaca, 1940.

¹³A phrase from this letter, which has not been pointed out, may well have suggested the character of Mosca. To justify his learned trifling Erasmus

economic abuses; the Latin satire is more encyclopedic in its reduction of all would-be wisdom to the various forms of foolishness. Nevertheless Erasmus begins by making Folly the daughter of the god of riches, and ends by providing Jonson with instances of chicanery to adapt to his favorite formula of "The Cheater Cheated." Folly's most eloquent ironies, on the pleasures of being a fool, find an English paraphrase in the song, "Fooles, they are the onely nation."¹⁴ The serious business which follows is designed to exhibit what happens "When wit waites upon the foole." The song completes the interlude because Folly — before arguing that fools are happier than so-called wise men — has argued that animals are happier than human beings, and has taken Lucian's *Dream* as her example:

*Proinde nunquam satis laudari gallum illum Pythagoram, qui cum unus omnia fuisset, philosophus, vir, mulier, rex, privatus, piscis, equus, rana, opinor etiam spongia, tamen nullum animal iudicavit calamitosius homine, propterea quod caetera omnia naturae finibus essent contenta, solus homo sortis suae limites egredi conaretur.*¹⁵

Jonson might have found in *The Dream* what Shakespeare was finding in Lucian's *Timon*, an object-lesson in the blessings of poverty and the corruptions of wealth. "The Cobblers cock," by crowing at the wrong moment, arouses its indigent master from his dream of a luxurious banquet, at which he has been celebrating the inheritance of a vast fortune. In response to the cobbler's surprise at hearing a bird speak, the cock confesses that it harbors the reincarnate soul of Pythagoras, and offers an account of its successive transmigrations — a series of Cynic jibes against the other philosophers.¹⁶ This has become a *locus classicus* on the subject of

cites a number of literary burlesques, including two of Lucian's, *The Fly* and *The Parasite*. This association ("muscam et parasiticam Lucianus") tends to support the view of Upton and Adams, questioned by Rea, that Mosca's eulogy of parasites at the beginning of the third act is also founded on Lucian. See I. B. Kan (ed.), *Stultitiae Laus*, The Hague, 1898, p. iv.

¹⁴Rea, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-163. By a curious coincidence, Machiavelli's *Mandragola* contains a similar song, as well as a plot which is similar to the Corvino-Celia subplot of *Volpone*. Cf. Domenico Guerri (ed.), *Le commedie*, Turin, 1932, p. 30:

*Quanto felice sia ciascun sel vede,
Chi nasce sciocco ed ogni cosa crede!*

¹⁵Kan, *op. cit.*, p. 62. Further references to this dialogue occur on pp. 91, 159.

¹⁶Jonson utilizes "that stranger doctrine of PYTHAGORAS" as a poetic conceit in his epigram to Sir Henry Savile; and nicknames the juggler Banks "our PYTHAGORAS" — presumably because he trained animals — in "The Famous Voyage," B. H. Newdigate (ed.), *The Poems of Ben Jonson*, Oxford, 1936, pp. 31, 55. Cf. also the stock allusion in *The Fortunate Isles*, ll. 255-259.

metempsychosis, and is instanced by Robert Burton, along with a parallel passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as a far-fetched proof of the immortality of the soul.¹⁷ Now the main theme of *Volpone* is a comic distortion of a theme that is tragic in *Hamlet* and tragicomic in *The Malcontent*, the pervasive Jacobean theme of disinheritance. Volpone's suitors, cheated of their legacies in the fifth act, are adumbrated in Lucian's cobbler, rudely awakened from his illusory banquet. Here, then, is the connexion between the interlude and the play, but the connexion has been left out of the interlude, which concentrates on metempsychosis.¹⁸ The cobbler has disappeared altogether,¹⁹ and Pythagoras has migrated from the cock to the epicene person of Androgynio, who seems to be both a fool and a hermaphrodite, and therefore an appropriately grotesque habitation for a soul that has already lodged in so many different men and monsters.²⁰

Jonson has added one significant new stage to this protean career. The last incarnation has been spent as

. . . a very strange beast, by some writers cal'd an asse;
By others, a precise, pure, illuminate brother,
Of those deuoure flesh, and sometimes one another:
And will drop you forth a libell, or a sanctified lie,
Betwixt euery spoonefull of a natiuitie-pie.²¹

In other words, as a Puritan. Fully endowed at this stage with all the gluttony and hypocrisy that Jonson associates with the type, he will eat a Christmas pie as readily as Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, but will refuse to call it by its popish name, just as Ananias later avoids mentioning the mass by speaking of "*Christ-tide*."²² "*Pythagore-*

¹⁷A. R. Shilleto (ed.), *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, London, 1893, I, 186.

¹⁸Elsewhere in the play *The Dream* is echoed in occasional *sententiae* on the power of gold, Rea, *op. cit.*, pp. 152, 220, 221.

¹⁹He appears, however, in Robert Wilson's *The Cobbler's Prophecy* (1594), which is based on the kindred theme of Alectryon, and may conceivably have influenced Jonson. The influence of another latter-day morality by Wilson, *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London*, upon *Cynthia's Revels* has been demonstrated by C. R. Baskerville, *English Elements in Jonson's Early Comedy* (University of Texas Studies in English, 1), Austin, 1911, pp. 253-256. It might be added that *Cynthia's Revels* owes something to Erasmus as well. "The Fountayne of selfe-Loue" takes the place of Folly's fountain, but Moria accompanies Philautia into Jonson's *dramatis personae*, and Hedon and Anides are apparently the sons of Folly's ladies-in-waiting, Ἡδονή and Ἀνοιδά. Cf. Kan, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²⁰The Jacobean interest in hermaphroditism is attested by the Citizen's Wife in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, A. R. Waller (ed.), *The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher*, Cambridge, 1908, vi, 201.

²¹*Volpone*, I, ii, 42-46.

²²*The Alchemist*, III, ii, 43.

ans all!" as Truewit exclaims, exasperated by the rule of silence in the household of the puritanical Morose.²³ This intermixture of Puritanism and Pythagoreanism does not seem to have been peculiar to Jonson. Shakespeare himself, in a farcical scene, condemns Malvolio to imprisonment until such time as he shall hold the opinion of Pythagoras: "That the soul of our grandam might happily inhabit a bird."²⁴ But Jonson had his own reasons for accusing the Puritans of shifting their coats as often as the soul of Pythagoras changed its shape, and of "Counting all old doctrine heresie."²⁵ Jonson, "in these dayes of reformation," was for twelve years a convert to Roman Catholicism.²⁶ *Volpone* was written at the height of this period, and in the immediate aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot. Sir Politick Wouldbe, with his genius for spying plots everywhere and his fear lest a tinder-box explode the Arsenale, is a caricature of the kind of suspicions from which Jonson must have been suffering.²⁷ His own relations with the chaplain to the Venetian ambassador may have suggested the locale of the play,²⁸ though Venice would seem to be an inevitable background for sharp mercantile practice and effete Italianate luxury.

The best chance of finding out anything about Jonson's personal preoccupations is to turn to his criticism of his fellow poets. In 1619, thirteen years after the composition of *Volpone*, he paid his publicized visit to Hawthornden. While there he frequently expressed, in his conversations with William Drummond, his fascination and exasperation with the poetry of John Donne. He went out of his way to explain a poem which has continued to perplex Donne's admirers and critics:

the Conceit of Dones transformation or μετεμψυχοσις was that he sought the soule of that Aple which Eva pulled, and thereafter made it the soule of a Bitch, then of a sheewolf & so of a woman. his generall purpose was to have brought in all the bodies of the Hereticks from ye soule of Cain & at last left it in ye body of Calvin. of this he never wrotte but one sheet, & now since he was made Doctor repenteth highlie & seeketh to destroy all his poems.²⁹

²³*Epicoene*, II, ii, 3.

²⁴*Twelfth Night*, IV, ii, 54-65.

²⁵*Volpone*, I, ii, 30-32.

²⁶*Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden*, Herford and Simpson, *op. cit.*, I, 139.

²⁷Professor Rea (pp. xxx-xliii) has made out an ingenious case for identifying this character with Sir Henry Wotton, then English ambassador to Venice. But, since there is no external evidence on Jonson's side, the argument — like all such identifications — becomes a *petitio principii*. Certainly it is hard to imagine Jonson paying to the original of Sir Politick the high tribute of memorizing his verses; see Herford and Simpson, I, 135.

²⁸See Jonson's letter to Lord Salisbury, *ibid.*, I, 202.

²⁹*Ibid.*, I, 136.

Jonson's explanation does not quite fit the poem that has come down to us entitled *The Progress of the Soul* and dated 1601. "This sullen Writ," though it remains a fragment, was the most ambitious poem that Donne had composed by that date. Its fifty-two ten-line stanzas could scarcely have been crowded into a single sheet. They specifically mention Mahomet and Luther, but not Calvin; instead, they darkly intimate that the soul's final destination is to be the body of Queen Elizabeth.³⁰ Small wonder that Donne left his project unfinished. A prefatory epistle, *obscurum per obscurius*, refers the reader to "the Pithagorian doctrine," and pursues the subject back to a vegetable state, when it may have been served at some "lascivious banquet."³¹ The poem itself, in picaresque fashion, traces the wandering spirit of heresy from the Garden of Eden through various flora and fauna as far as Cain's wife. Much discursive satire, Professor Grierson has noted, is directed against women and courtiers—like the contemporaneous satire of *Hamlet*.³² *Hamlet*, it should also be noted, is obsessed with a perverse notion of metempsychosis: his conceits follow the progress of a king through the guts of a beggar, and dwell upon the metamorphoses of Alexander and Caesar.³³ Indeed, *Hamlet's* cynical belief that "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so"³⁴ is the burden of Donne's abrupt conclusion:

Ther's nothing simply good, nor ill alone,
Of every quality comparison,
The onely measure is, and judge, opinion.³⁵

The Progress of the Soul bears all the stigmata of having been written in what Donne's biographer calls "a feverish crisis of intellectual pride."³⁶ Having lost the Catholic faith of his fathers a few years before, he was not to find a haven in the Anglican church until he had spent several years in spiritual limbo. The Essex *débâcle*, which moved Cyril Tourneur to elaborate the tortuous allegory of *The Transformed Metamorphosis*, must have prompted Donne to express his profound sense of the transformation from one age to another. The scheme of his poem was probably derived

³⁰H. J. C. Grierson (ed.), *The Poems of John Donne*, Oxford, 1912, I, 297.

³¹*Ibid.*, I, 294.

³²*Ibid.*, II, 219.

³³*Hamlet*, IV, iii, 32-33; V, i, 224-239.

³⁴*Ibid.*, II, ii, 255-257.

³⁵Grierson, *op. cit.*, I, 316.

³⁶Edmund Gosse, *The Life and Letters of John Donne*, London, 1899, I, 141.

from Lucian's *Dream*.³⁷ But in Donne's mind, the mind of a skeptical theologian, Lucian's fantasy was only the point of departure for his own explorations into the problem of evil. Rashly he undertook to account for the maladies of the new age by following them back, through a chain of being, to the original fruit of the tree of knowledge. To reconcile the values of this world with the ethics of traditional Christianity, or to justify the ways of men to God — these were problems as insoluble as to tell where all past years are, or who cleft the devil's foot. The logical solution was an ethical relativism, which accepted the Reformation as a necessary evil and regarded the aging queen as neither good nor bad but great.³⁸ This was "greatness" in Fielding's sense of the word, a greatness closely allied to roguery. But it was not Donne's ultimate solution; from the pulpit of his later years we find him reverting to "this transmigration of sin."³⁹ So Dr. Faustus, having denied absolute sin, recognized its existence in his final outcry, and prayed to be reborn as a brutish beast: "Ah *Pythagoras metemsucosis*."⁴⁰

Satire springs from some perception of the disparities between the real and the ideal. Hence the satirist's position is always shifting; sooner or later he must embrace one extreme or the other. Donne, in choosing religion, chose the idealistic extreme. Jonson chose realism, and *Volpone* marks this crucial phase of his development. Possibly Mosca's interlude was written before the rest of the play, like the puppet-show in *Bartholomew Fair*.⁴¹ At all events, it is a product of the mood that produced *The Progress of the Soul*. That mood had not abated from 1601 to 1605, but Jonson's animus against the Puritans had extended to the professions of medicine and law, and to the whole world of finance. On the relations between early protestantism and modern business, which social historians have been calling to our attention,⁴² he is a shrewd and voluble witness. In *Volpone* he is still willing to sacrifice comedy to morality; he is still embittered by the failure of the tragedy of *Sejanus* and the mood of the "Comicall Satyres" — his three un-

³⁷This is the view of the most conscientious student of Donne's reading, Miss M. P. Ramsay, *Les doctrines médiévales chez Donne*, Oxford, 1917, p. 58.

³⁸For the relation of this position to other aspects of his thought, see C. M. Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy*, New York, 1937, p. 252.

³⁹Henry Alford (ed.), *The Works of John Donne*, London, 1837, III, 611.

⁴⁰C. F. T. Brooke (ed.), *The Works of Christopher Marlowe*, Oxford, 1910, p. 193.

⁴¹Gifford, *op. cit.*, IV, 509n.

⁴²Notably R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, London, 1926.

successful attempts to make the theatre an instrument of reform and put John Marston out of his humour. *Volpone* is Jonson's last experiment in poetic justice, and his own reservations about the final arraignment are confirmed by Dryden's criticism.⁴³ In his next play, *Epicoene*, the mood is relaxed; the earlier satire is burlesqued in a legalistic *dénouement*; and the scene is set, for the first time, in no "fustian cuntry" but on English soil. All that was needed, before the consummate realism of *Bartholomew Fair*, was to naturalize the Italian comic types of *Every Man in his Humour*, and to announce in the prologue to *The Alchemist*:

Our *Scene* is *London*, 'cause we would make knowne,
No countries mirth is better then our owne.
No clime breeds better matter, for your whore,
Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more,
Whose manners, now call'd humors, feed the stage.⁴⁴

In some respects *The Alchemist* is a realistic version of *Volpone*. The germ of the mature comedy is the mountebank scene, where Sir Politick is gulled by Volpone's medicine-show, and Peregrine comments:

I neuer heard the like: or BROUGHTONS bookes.⁴⁵
But *Alchimy*,

Here, reading between the lines, we can see the plot already hatching that will pit the jargon of the alchemists against the rival cant of the Puritans, and confuse everything — in the nick of time — with the ravings of the Reverend Hugh Broughton. The motive power of *The Alchemist*, the device of the philosophers' stone, may likewise have been furnished by Erasmus.⁴⁶ It is a greater hoax than Volpone's will, for the sinister magnificence of *Volpone* is supposed to be real, even though it is never inherited by the Venetian conspirators. Whereas the pretensions of *The Alchemist* are spurious from the start, and the London conspirators — delineated by a more tough-minded realist — are a familiar and threadbare pack of coney-catchers and gulls. Sir Epicure Mammon, perhaps, is a gull extraordinary. His very name is a compound of luxury and wealth. But the only fortune that he inherits is the legacy of Lucian's cobbler — the harsh reality that wakes him from his golden visions and epicurean banquets. He is a voluptuary, like Vol-

⁴³W. P. Ker (ed.), *Essays of John Dryden*, Oxford, 1926, I, 73.

⁴⁴*The Alchemist*, Prologue, ll. 5-9.

⁴⁵*Volpone*, II, ii, 117-118.

⁴⁶Gifford, *op. cit.*, IV, 118n.

pone, and he speaks the same magnificent language; but unlike Volpone, who is a great rogue, Mammon is a great fool. Yet Mammon is the more comic figure, and it may be argued that *The Alchemist* is the greater comedy. If folly and roguery are the two staples of Jonsonian comedy, then the follies of *Volpone* are too sinister, while the rogueries of *The Alchemist* are comparatively genial. By the time that he was ready to revise *Every Man in his Humour*, Jonson had learned that the true function of comedy is "To sport with humane follies, not with crimes."⁴⁷ As his powers of realistic depiction came into full play, he gradually relinquished his loudly proclaimed moral purposes. Vainly Face apologizes for the amoral ending of *The Alchemist*.⁴⁸ Shakespeare and Donne had discovered that good and evil, in this world, are matters of opinion. So, finally, had Jonson. Mankind was subdivided, it now seemed, not into good men and bad, but into rogues and fools. Consequently, the rôle of the comic playwright was not to judge but to observe. After *Volpone*, it may be said that Jonson's genius underwent a metempsychosis of its own and, having died with a stern satirist, was reborn in a genial observer.

⁴⁷*Every Man in his Humour*, Prologue, l. 24.

⁴⁸*The Alchemist*, V, v, 157-165.