

School pack for *Volpone*

performed by The Parlement of Foules

Dear teachers,

the following questions and topics are just ideas and suggestions to prepare yourself and your students for our performance of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. Please add, remove, and change as much as you like.

We are looking forward to seeing you in theatre and are always happy to receive feedback on this pack and the performance from you,

The Parlement of Foules

Part I: Characters

→ The principal characters in *Volpone* are named after various animals, birds and insects. What attributes do you associate with the following?

- fox
- fly
- raven
- crow
- vulture
- parrot
- falcon

→ How are these related to each other in the food chains of nature? What happens/could happen if they were to interact with each other? Get together with a partner and think of the relationships between the animals, birds and insects. Represent that relationship in a tableau.

→ Find out what your family name/first name means. Do you think it describes your personality or your looks? Where might family names and names in general come from?

Character sketches:

Volpone:

Volpone loves anything that will keep him entertained: music, banquets, possibly women, and definitely playing tricks on others. Although he claims that he has no family, friends or allies, it does seem as if Mosca, his servant, is some kind of a friend and/or ally, as he is the only person Volpone trusts – indeed, he relies on Mosca to get him out of awkward and dangerous situations. Volpone has acquired his wealth mainly by cheating it out of other people. However, he does not merely want to possess his treasure: he spends it on his entertainment. He loves the game and enjoys tricking other people into believing what he wants them to.

Mosca:

Mosca is deservedly called the parasite by everyone else in the play. In his early twenties, he has been Volpone's right-hand man for some time now, serving him as friend and accomplice. Mosca is low-born, but through natural cleverness and studied eloquence he manages to scramble his way up to the top, a scramble that consists of cheating, conning and manipulating people. Due to his low status, he is easily overlooked and underestimated by Venice's gentry, a fact which he ruthlessly exploits for his and Volpone's dazzling schemes. While Mosca is not afraid to get his hands dirty, many times he remains the puppet master in the background who makes everyone dance according to his own fancy. While Volpone is the more intellectual and philosophical of the two, Mosca is more cynical.

Voltore is a very intelligent, distinguished and educated lawyer with great rhetorical skills, who is able to convince anyone of any case. He uses legal language to dazzle people into believing whatever he wants them to in order to gain the highest profit for himself, happy to sell his skills to the highest bidder – and even to take money from both sides, playing them off each other to his own financial gain. His two weaknesses are his greed and his willingness to believe what he wants to believe, which might make him miss a few important developments in Venice.

Corbaccio is a very old Venetian of high social rank, who used to have much influence and power in younger days. Unfortunately, his old age and all that comes with it, such as poor vision and hearing, makes it difficult for him to keep up with the pace at which business is done in Venice. Even though he believes himself to be much more agile than his poor health allows, Corbaccio tries to win the young and clever Mosca as a friend and ally to help him achieve his aims in order to get back in the game. Therefore, he sets up a plan with Mosca to increase his fortune, even though that means he has to (at least temporarily) disinherit his son, Bonario, to whom he has a fairly detached relationship.

Corvino is a merchant, married to Celia. He is extremely jealous and possessive of his wife and tries to keep her hidden from the world. He doesn't respect her and has very conservative opinions. His reputation is very important to him and he is greedy for money. Because he is in a financial crisis he will do anything to keep his reputation and social status and turns to Volpone because he hopes to save himself with the inheritance. Sometimes he is conceited, but sometimes also insecure. He has an explosive temper which at times gets out of control, but on the other hand he is the only one to ever show any sympathy for Volpone.

Celia, Corvino's young and beautiful wife, is a very religious and rather quiet person. She often has to suffer under her husband's choleric fits. Her naivety leads her to put her faith too much in false 'gods'.

Sir Politic Would-Be is an Englishman who takes immense pride in his title and status. He deems himself a very clever person and comes up with numerous – actually idiotic – schemes to make money through trading with (and even against) the Venetians. Although he came to Venice mainly because his wife wanted to go, he feels quite comfortable around the Italians

and, according to himself, has adapted so well that he could easily be mistaken for one of them. It is hard to stop him talking when he is in full flow...

Lady Would-Be, Sir Politic's wife, wanted to see Venice for the arts, culture and fashion of the city. She is hardly ever seen without her two maidservants who have to endure all her moods and unstoppable chatter. Vain and focussed on her and her husband's reputation at home and abroad, she tends to only go for the outward appearance of things instead of looking deeper into matters. That is probably the reason why she constantly fusses about her hair and makeup.

Peregrine, a young man who has only just arrived in Venice from England, is looking for adventure. He does not know much about the city and its people yet but is a quick learner and eager to find an entertaining guide. Sir Politic might just be the right person for that job.

Bonario, son of Corbaccio, is a young nobleman of Venice. He is a very down-to-earth person and tries to treat all people, whatever their status, politely and fairly. He is definitely not one for pomp and circumstance. Like Celia, however, he has a rather naïve belief in justice and the legal system.

Note: There are also minor characters such as judges, merchants, soldiers, and servants.

→ Now that you know a bit more about the characters of the play, get together in groups of three to five people and imagine a possible story with some or all of the characters above in it. Present your ideas in front of your classmates. Remember, there is no right or wrong: just use the information you have and your imagination.

Part II: Plot/Background

Plot summary

Volpone, a Venetian nobleman, has been fooling the city's rich for years. By making them believe that he is about to die without any heir, he has attracted three legacy hunters, outdoing each other to be put into Volpone's will: Corbaccio (an ancient nobleman), Voltore (a cunning lawyer) and Corvino (a merchant). Assisted by his part-servant, part-friend Mosca, Volpone manages to convince Corbaccio to disinherit his own son to make Volpone his heir instead, and the otherwise rather jealous Corvino to offer a night with his young wife Celia.

But they are not the only ones eyeing Volpone's fortune: An English couple, Sir and Lady Politic Would-Be, who are enjoying a holiday in Venice, are working their own schemes in the city. Sir Would-Be, accompanied and secretly mocked by a clever new arrival, Peregrine, tries to set up a dodgy trade in red herrings, as well as many other "goods". His Lady, on the other hand, is trying to work her feminine charms on Volpone to make her name known abroad and maybe scoop off a little money on the way.

When Volpone pretends to have died and installs Mosca as his heir, tempers boil over – especially since Mosca now spots his own chance for power and wealth...

The Author

Ben (Benjamin) Jonson lived from 1572 to 1637, which makes him a contemporary (and also rival) of William Shakespeare. At first, he worked as a bricklayer and later as a soldier before becoming a writer. He wrote plays and poems and also was an actor with the group *The Admiral's Men*. Jonson was a very educated man and especially loved Greek and Roman classics. In this he thought himself superior to most other poets of his time. He was a favourite of King James I., who sponsored him, but was short on money after James' death. After a stroke he was paralyzed for the last years of his life. When he died in 1637 he was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Volpone was Jonson's biggest success and was liked by scholars and ordinary people alike.

The England of Jonson's Time

After the long reign of Queen Elizabeth I. in 1603 King James I. was crowned. He was never as popular as Elizabeth but managed to end the long war with Spain. During his reign the British colonization of America began. James I. had difficulties with the Parliament about who was the ultimate authority in England.

The time was a "Golden Age" for literature and theatre in England with William Shakespeare as the most influential writer. However, the Puritans, who were a politically influential group of Protestants at that time, were against the theatre because they thought it to be immoral.

Italy for the English

Italy was the country of origin of the Renaissance in the 14th and 15th century, which reached England a little later and had its high time in the 16th century. English nobles travelled to Italy to see ancient ruins and culture and artists went there to learn from Renaissance artists.

→ Why do you think Jonson set the play in Italy? Could there have been a reason to let it take place abroad?

Part III: Message/What to expect

Now that you have an idea what the play might be about:

→ Who of the characters is good/bad, immoral/amoral/moral?

→ Is there a hero/heroine in the story?

→ Has anyone ever wanted things from you but not given anything back in return? Would you do favours if you got money in return?

Set up a price list for things like

- doing homework for someone
- lying to protect someone
- stealing something for someone
- killing someone

Think of at least three more items and compare them to the prices of your classmates. How do they differ? Why do you have more or less scruples to do some of these things?

→ How could the play end? Will there be a message/moral? What could it be and why?

→ Celia and Bonario will both ask for justice for what has been done to them. The punishment of the guilty will differ, depending on their social class. Can you think of any contexts where we can consider it just that different people who commit the same crime should be punished differently?

→ What do you think the costumes in the performance will look like? Will the actors behave like their “animal” characters? What would be reasons for or against it?

→ Will there be many props on stage? Could there be music? What kind of music (instruments, voices, style,...)

Part IV: After the performance

→ Were you satisfied with the outcome of the story?

→ What did you think about costumes, props, music, lights, etc? Were they appropriate and why (not)?

→ Which scene did you find particularly interesting/sad/funny and why?

→ Who of the characters could you identify with and why? Which characters did you like/dislike?

→ Where would you have reacted differently?

→ Do you think everybody got their just deserts in the end? Who made sure of that? Was it Mosca? Volpone? Voltore? Or maybe the judges? How would you punish the characters of the play if you were the judge? Get together with three or four of your classmates and come up with a verdict of your own. Be prepared to justify and explain your decision in class.