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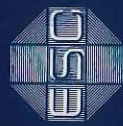
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# The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare & Volpone by Ben Jonson



# a question of CHARACTER

"Language most shewes  
a man; speak, that I may  
see thee"

Jonson — *Discoveries*

If, as Jonson suggests, character is most revealed by speech, the idea of 'cozenage', or deliberate deception, raises a number of uncertainties about what constitutes identity. In his two most performed comedies, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, the desire for profit provides the motivation for a series of impostures and disguises perpetrated by a pair of cheats on an unsuspecting society. Disguise conceals identity, and this can be serious or playful, or both, shifting between jest and earnest.

Jonson's use of disguise in these plays is conventional, initially at least, in that it generates in the audience the expectation of discovery, of revelation. Less conventional, though a popular conceit, is the way disguise is used to call into question the most fundamental assumptions about the identity of the disguised character. The more convincing the disguise — the less it depends on a physical cover-up — the harder it is to accept one face as 'true' and the other as 'false'.

Jonson has a central, expert dissimulator in each play: Face in *The Alchemist* and Volpone (the Fox) in the play





which bears his name. These *virtuosi* enjoy the identity game for its own sake, relishing their own theatricality — there is no final revelation or discovery, for they ARE the succession of identities they assume. Towards the end of *The Alchemist*, we see Face become Jeremy but we never saw Jeremy become Face. His name is highly ironic, given the number of disguises he uses — Face, Captain, Lungs and Bellows, Ulen, a Spanish Count, clean-shaven Jeremy.

Names can identify an individual superficially; in Jonsonian comedy, they are as clear an indication of identity as any. Volpone, the Fox, is obviously named for his cunning; Mosca, the Fly, is named as a parasite; Corvino, the Crow, is named for his attitude to the dying man, soon — he thinks — to become the ‘carrión’ he can feed on.

Volpone rejects the criteria which normally help to determine identity. He violates his given social identity as *magnifico* by his role-playing. His is an attempt to prove his wit, what he is fond of calling his ‘genius’, by getting the better of other members of his own class. He plays on the greed which was one of its characteristics to make fools of his peers, but in doing so he alienates himself from any part in the collective identity which social class offers.

A trade or profession goes some way towards defining the individual, even more precisely than social class.

With Mosca present, Volpone tries to postulate an identity which is independent of external considerations. Ironically, it is couched as a series of absences and negations. He has “no trade, no venture”, he is “not like the thresher,/ Nor the merchant”, nor a series of other possibilities. When Mosca exits, Volpone crowns the series of

makes him what we would call a ‘man of substance’. In the search for a core of personality, however, the play of shifting *personae* denies any real substance within. So the wealth which is Volpone’s ‘substance’ — and its fate, which is highly ironic — takes on a greater significance, being the sum of the value of the man himself.



negations by pointing to his lack of even a family by which to define himself:

I have no wife, no parent,  
child, ally,  
To give my substance to;  
but whom I make  
Must be my heir.”

So what, then, is the ‘substance’ of Volpone’s identity? Clearly, when he uses the term, he is referring to his material wealth, which

Volpone postures as the opposite of what he is; he denies his almost Bacchanalian enjoyment of life by posing as a dying man, and calls it his ‘genius’. Where this could seem daring, or rebellious, in the end it proves to be due to an unwise recklessness — for that which is so easily inverted may not right itself so easily.



Where it is self-evident, and expected, that Mosca relies on Volpone for his identity as much as his livelihood, it is surprising to see the extent of Volpone's dependence on his servant. This dependence has sinister implications in terms of the question of identity, as it belies the principle of personal autonomy. Volpone relies on Mosca for more than the practical co-operation which ensures the success of their cozenage, though like Face-Jeremy, he denies the mutual dependence of the relationship.

Further than this practical need for an accomplice, Volpone's enjoyment of such role-playing, whether as the dying man or as Scoto the mountebank, depends entirely on Mosca's presence as audience. He needs someone to share the joke with, so that it becomes evident that successful cozenage is not enough in itself but must be witnessed and approved by an appreciative collaborator.

"Speak, that I may see thee" carries, as well as the promise of self-revelation in speech, the threat of annihilation in silence. This threat is compounded by the state of non-being all characters fall into at the end of a play. The characters' identities are constituted only by the active collusion of an outside agent: audience or reader.

Although by the end of the play he seems to have fared so much worse than Face-Jeremy in *The Alchemist*, like him, Volpone returns for a final appeal to the audience:

Now, though the Fox be  
punished by the laws,  
He yet doth hope there is  
no suffering due  
For any fact which he  
hath done 'gainst you.

By using the third person, the speaker of the Epilogue seeks to detach himself from Volpone, but in the final two lines he reaffirms that he is the same physical person of the last five acts. The question of identity thus remains ambiguous, although by referring to the possibility of a real relationship with the audience (the request for applause, and the reference to possible censure) the Epilogue seems to try to affirm his existence, and to defer the moment of his imminent annihilation.

Jonson disallows the possibility of a stable self, so that only the actors and their roles — and their speculations about what constitutes existence — remain. The characters' only possible discovery of self is in the process of playing, and the audience expectation of a final recognition when the disguises are abandoned is deferred indefinitely.

Gillian Austen

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