Sources for Volpone

It appears that the plot of *Volpone* was invented by Ben Jonson himself. Various scholars have looked into its pre-history but most of their suggestions as its story-source appear a little forced.

Nonetheless, various sources for *Volpone*'s style and ideas are obviously called for.

The idea of a crafty fox (which is the English translation of *Volpone*) being outwitted comes originally from the fables of Aesop, originally written in the sixth and seventh century BC.
http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Aesop/Aesops_Fables/index.html
Many of the play's characters' animal souls are reflected in these stories.

Many of the characters in the stories are based on Commedia dell'arte characters (Corbaccio is clearly a *Pantalone* character; Voltore a *Dottore* etc). Volpone's servants are referred to as Zanies, and some of the scenes are clearly some form of *lazzi*.

It seems apparent that Ben Jonson was deliberately exploring (possibly to undermine) other contemporary views of Venice (not least those of Thomas Coryat), and there are many direct similarities with Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, written about ten years before *Volpone*.
http://www.online-literature.com/shakespeare/merchant/
Among the links and echoes to *The Merchant of Venice* are the two Court Scenes (presenting very different views of Venetian Justice), the idea of Gold "breeding" (and its worship) and

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the seduction of Celia. It is possible that Jonson, a natural rebel, was making the point that all Venetians, not just the Jews, were money-seeking and out for themselves (a reasonably fair comment). As such, he is extremely bitter (and funny) about all human weaknesses.

The other Venetian play by Shakespeare was *Othello*.
http://www.maximumedge.com/shakespeare/othello.htm
While much less obviously a source for *Volpone*, there are some very obvious similarities between the play, not least in the characters of Iago & Mosca, and the attitudes to the problems in Venetian society. Jonson would definitely have known the play, written a couple of years before, and for the same company as *Volpone*.

A very good and accessible DVD on the history & culture of Venice is the BBC's *Francesco's Venice*, narrated by Francesco da Mosto, a Venetian native. A lot of the ideas running through these plays are very apparent in this DVD.

The other play that may be referenced as a template could be Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, written about 15 years previously. http://www2.prestel.co.uk/rey/jew.htm

One of the methods Jonson uses is to satirise the literary conventions used by his contemporaries. Indeed, the play often fails to fit into good narratological categories, which make it both uncomfortable and exciting to watch: it contains elements of *Commedia dell'arte*, "City Comedies", beast fables, Machiavelli's *La Mandragola (The Mandrake)* and echoes of Horace, Juvenal, Catullus, Ovid and other classical sources.
Other City comedies can be found on the net at
http://www.tech.org/~cleary/chast.html *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*
http://www.bartleby.com/47/1/11.html *The Shoemaker's Holiday*
http://hollowaypages.com/jonson1692humour.htm *Every Man in His Humour*

About eight years before writing *Volpone*, Jonson announced his conversion to Catholicism. Arguments rage as to how genuine this conversion was, or the extent to which he was just doing it as an act of rebellion (being Catholic was largely illegal, and certainly prosecutable in Late Elizabethan/early Jacobean England), or to what extent he couldn't help getting into trouble (shortly after the Scottish James I's accession to the throne of England, he co-wrote

Eastward Ho!, a play that satirised Scots and put him in prison for at least the third time). It is therefore difficult to know which Bible he would have been quoting from. In these notes, we make the assumption that he would have used the Catholic Douai Bible.
http://www.latinvulgate.com/
It is, however, possible that he, like most other English people, would have used the ultra-Protestant Geneva Bible, though his clear dislike of Puritans might make this less likely.
http://www.genevabible.org/Geneva.html

A lot of the themes that appear in *Volpone* also appear in Jonson's *Epigrams*:
http://hollowaypages.com/jonson1692epigrams.htm
These were first published as a group in 1616, in the First Folio of Jonson's *Works*, but date from throughout his career as a playwright up to that point. They show the full extent of his classical learning, on which he prided himself. Both Lady Would-Be (62) and Peregrine (85) appear in different guises in these poems.

There is no textual doubt over *Volpone*: both the 1607 Quarto edition and the version included in the Folio *Works* of 1616 were overseen by Jonson himself (unlike all Shakespeare's editions), and the differences between them are minor (a couple of lines added or cut, a reference to God replaced after the 1608 Act, punctuation made less idiosyncratic – and possibly less dramatic – in the later edition). However, the performance time of the play as it stands is well over four hours and would (does) require some heavy cutting and-or directorial decisions to be made, the most obvious being whether to cut the whole Sir Pol subplot or Act One Scene Two (the little Pythagoras play-within-the-play).

Some readers suggest that there were two versions of the play: one for performance at The Globe, where a lot of the classical references were cut and it was played as a straight farce, and one performed for the Universities and possibly the Middle Temple or Blackfriars, with the Classical references retained, to flatter Jonson's audience that they were really clever for following all the references he put in. The difficulty is seeing which bits would be cut for the "Universities" show to make way for the "clever" material. W. David Kay, in *Ben Jonson. A Literary Life* (Macmillan, 1995) makes it clear that the version(s) we have is a "poetic" edition, designed to be read, where readers would have more opportunity at being impressed with themselves at how clever they are in understanding all the jokes, and there is an (unpublished) "acting" version that Jonson's colleagues would have performed. A similar theory has come out about the Folio edition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It should be pointed

out that there is no direct textual evidence (to our knowledge) for either theory. It is also possible that seventeenth Century audiences liked getting their money's worth, and were fine about spending almost five hours (standing) watching a good play. University audiences probably found all the mockery of ancient philosophers riotous. Modern audiences are less tough.

It has been suggested (though Jonson himself denies it in his *Epistle*, attached to the 1607 first edition of the play) that the character of Volpone was based on Thomas Sutton, a very rich commoner who, because he was heirless, managed to make lots of others make him their heirs, in the hope that he would reciprocate. When he died, his (considerable) wealth was instead used to found the Charterhouse Hospital.

A "Parasite", in the term used about Mosca, does not have the same pejorative sense it would now have, though it probably means something akin to the modern concepts of "ligger", "hanger-on" or "personal manager".

THE ARGUMENT & THE PROLOGUE:

The Argument is done as an acrostic, in the style of the Roman playwright Plautus: Ben Jonson was very proud of his classical learning, and often mocked other "lesser" playwrights like Shakespeare, who "knew no Latin and less Greek".

Jonson's Prologue does not really introduce the play as much as introduce the playwright, and it is a typically pugnacious attack on some of his colleagues and rivals: it attacks people who collaborate on plays ("co-adjutor,/ Novice, journeyman or tutor"), despite the fact that we know Jonson himself collaborated on a number of plays (two of which ended him up in prison). He claims to have written the whole play in five weeks, and he claims it is better than any other play on the market at the moment.

This scene, and Act One Scene Two, were clearly written for the very talented clowns playing Nano, Angrogyno and Castrone. We assume that one of them was (the quite short) Robert Armin, the King's Men's resident "fool" (who would have played Touchstone in *As You Like It* and Feste in *Twelfth Night*), though presumably Androgyno & Castrone would be played by talented boy actors, who would otherwise have played women's parts. Because Jonson has also written Celia and Lady Pol, that would have called for four boy-actors, which is a high (but not unprecedented) number for the time. But three of them would also have to have been very talented comedians too.

This Prologue is mostly an attack on Thomas Dekker and John Marston, who accused Jonson of "railing" rather than writing anything coherent. Jonson particularly lays into Marston, whose "let custards quake" line he earlier ridiculed as "biting satire" in his *Poetaster*, Act Five Scene Three.
http://hollowaypages.com/jonson1692poetaster.htm
Since then, Jonson had even collaborated with Marston, but on the disastrous *Eastward Ho!*, which had got them both sent to prison. Probably this had got the "War of the Theatres" started all over again.

One of the claims the Prologue makes is that Jonson is a better playwright than the others because he follows Aristotle's "laws of time, place, persons" (The Dramatic Unities). Interestingly, in this play, he doesn't.

ACT ONE SCENE ONE:

Jonson immediately shocks his Renaissance audience, by having his character blasphemously express a kind of Matins Prayer to Gold, explicitly replacing the Son of God (Jesus) with the Son of the Sun (Gold in alchemical thought). The similarity of the words Soul and Sol (the Sun) is almost certainly deliberate. He makes a deliberate parody of the opening of Genesis, when God created order out of Chaos:
http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=1
There is a sense in which he is deliberately using "Catholic" language (Relics, Saints, Blessed room, the price of souls) possibly to parody it, or possibly to demonstrate quite how corrupt Volpone is. He even compares Gold to God as the Aristotelian "Unmoved Mover", taken as part of Catholic belief since Thomas Aquinas.
His language is wide-ranging, taking in Ovid's concept of the Golden Age, equivalent to the Christian concept of the Garden of Eden, from *Metamorphoses Books* 1 (lines 87-112) & 15 (lines 103-111).
http://www.elizabethanauthors.com/ovid01.htm
The reference is to Golding's 1567 translation, though Jonson, priding himself on being a great Classicist, might well have gone back to the Latin for his reference.
A lot of this speech appears to have been taken from Seneca's Latin translation of Euripides' *Danae* (a Greek play now lost), and referred to his Epistle CXV (115):
http://www.stoics.com/seneca_epistles_book_3.html#'CXV1
Apparently, in the fourth century BC, Euripides' original audience booed his actors off for expressing such sentiments, and he (like Jonson in his *Epistle*) had to state that the character expressing such sentiments would be punished at the end of the play.

It is worth comparing this speech in praise of gold to The Prince of Morocco's similar speech in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. There also seems to be a reference to the Venetian Antonio's means of getting money when Volpone says he "expose[s] no ships/ To threat'nings of the furrow-faced sea."

Mosca paraphrases Horace's *Satires* (Book 2 Satire 3) to explain how Volpone gets his money:
http://www.authorama.com/works-of-horace-7.html

ACT ONE SCENE TWO:

While the servants claim it is "neither play, nor university show", the cluster of Classical references make it more suitable for a University audience. It is indeed possible that this section was not part of the King's Men's play, but was inserted either for the performances at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, or simply for the "Poem" edition that was published in 1607. It is an obvious piece to cut in live performance, as, while it demonstrates Volpone's voluptuousness and decadence, it does slow down the plot. The story (or argument) echoes themes in Lucian of Samosata's *The Cock* or *The Dream*. This is a parody of Pythagoras's beliefs, which also mocks the worship of wealth.
http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/luc/wl3/wl308.htm

Nano's argument is that the soul comes from Apollo (god of the Sun) but then descends through Aethilides (herald of Jason's Argonauts) to Euphorbus (killer of Achilles' lover Patroclus, and himself killed by Menelaus), to the philosopher Hermontius, to Pyrrhus (the fisherman –philosopher of Delos), then onto Pythagoras himself, then to Aspasia (mistress of the Athenian General Pericles, and accused of being a brothel-keeper by his enemies), then to Crates of Thebes (a Cynic philosopher, disdainer of wealth and teacher of Zeno the Stoic), then through various animals until it reaches (as in Lucian) "the cobbler's cock". This (and the reference to Pythagoras' "golden thigh") are partly mockeries of Aristotle's belief that Pythagoras was an incarnation of Apollo, and the Pythagorean belief that you should not eat either animal products or beans (as souls could also enter into beans).
He then goes on to mock both Puritans (the "Reformed") and the austere Catholic Carthusians. Puritans are mocked as those who eat "Nativity Pie" (avoiding the word "Christmas") and eat each other in their hatred of ritual, as St Paul suggests in his letter to the Galatians (5:15):
http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=1&b=9&c=5

The piece itself is written in a deliberately old-fashioned style of rhymed tetrameter couplets with varying number of unstressed syllables, rather like the Medieval Morality or Mystery plays.

The Song in praise of Fools makes a pun on the fool's "bauble", the "babble" of mentally handicapped people, and Tower of Babel (from Genesis 11):
http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=1&c=11

The playlet on how close human souls are to the souls of animals is immediately followed by the arrival of Voltore, the vulture-souled lawyer.

Volpone makes reference to Aesop's Tale of *The Fox and the Crow*, which he says should be his family crest.

Mosca's joke about asses dressed in purple thinking themselves as wise as Doctors of Divinity is taken from Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*:
http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=551&chapter=104197&layout=html&Itemid=27

ACT ONE SCENE THREE:

Voltore's golden gift was bought "of St Mark": not only was the Piazza di San Marco famous for its goldsmiths, but St Mark's Cathedral itself was famous for being constructed of pieces stolen from other places (most notably the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople).

ACT ONE SCENE FOUR:

Mosca's speech to the plate at the start of the scene is reminiscent of the dialogue between Antonio and Shylock at the start of *The Merchant of Venice* Act One Scene Three, where they discuss money "breeding".

The unnatural sexual reproduction of money (as opposed to human beings) is one of the persistent themes of the play.

Corbaccio is a raven, known in literature as a bird that neglects its offspring (as Corbaccio does later), but also a scavenger of dead animals.

A “rook” meant both a type of raven and a trick.

Mosca compares how easy it is to trick a deaf man with the way in which Jacob managed to trick his father’s blessing away from his elder brother in Genesis 27:
http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=1&c=27

As Corbaccio leaves, Mosca refers to most of the Seven Deadly Sins. It is notable that Pride, the chief source of sin, according to Aquinas, is most expressed by Volpone himself, and Mosca subjects him to almost identical flattery to that which he has just subjected Corbaccio.

Aeson was the father of Jason, restored to youth by Medea’s magic, like Corbaccio hopes to be by the power of money.

ACT ONE SCENE FIVE:

Crows in Renaissance thought were famous for their sexual fidelity (which Jonson plays on) and were (especially if you look at Aesop) the inveterate enemy of foxes.

“Oriental pearls” may be a slang for Corvino’s testicles. The Orient was considered the place for decadence and voluptuousness, but then so was Venice.

Volpone’s sexual habits, with the dregs of society, “beggars,/ Gypsies, and Jews, and black-moors”, may be some sort of indication that Mosca is suggesting that Volpone is dying of syphilis or gonorrhoea. Venice was well-known for its prostitution, both its *Cortigiana Onesta* (high class “escort”) and its *Cortigiana di Lume* (common whore). The following speech, ostensibly an attack on Volpone, suggests that before his “good marriage” Corvino was also a regular frequenter of prostitutes.

The reference to The Turk may be a reference to Turks in general (renowned for their decadence) or particularly the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed III, famous for being the fattest

and most drunken Sultan in a very long time, despite actually being an effective war leader (conquering half of Hungary, among other places). He also had his brothers strangled by deaf-mutes to ensure his own succession.

Volpone's comment that "This is better than rob churches" could be a general comment on his decadence, or could be a reference to how Venice became so rich in the first place.

The description of Corvino's beautiful wife is almost a literary commonplace, done in the style of a lover's speech from Commedia, but Mosca mingles in language of gold-trading, and also references Aesop's tale of *The Fox and the Grapes*.

ACT TWO SCENE ONE:

Sir Politic compares himself to Homer's Ulysses (Odysseus)
http://www.bartleby.com/111/chapman14.html
Although the first English translation of *The Odyssey* (by George Chapman) was a few years away, Jonson was a friend (and former collaborator on the disastrous *Eastward Ho!*) with George Chapman. No only that, but he prided himself on his classical knowledge. How easy it would have been for his audience to have got the reference is unknown: anyone with the beginnings of a University education would have known the opening of *The Odyssey* in the original Greek, and some of the Grammar School audience would have known it in at least a Latin translation, but it might be that the point of giving Sir Pol this reference might be to show him off as a man of little learning and even less understanding of what he has read.

Sir Pol automatically denies that his purpose in coming to Venice has been to convert to Catholicism: indeed, he questions Peregrine on whether he has "licence" from the Privy Council to travel in Catholic countries.

Sir Pol asks Peregrine if he has made friends yet with Sir Henry Wotton, spy, intriguer and ambassador at the time (and until 1624) to Venice:
http://www.tudorplace.com.ar/images/Wotton,Henry.jpg
It is possible that Sir Pol is supposed to be a parody of Wotton?

A lot of the references are to recent events: a royal lioness kept in the Tower of London had cubs in both 1604 and 1605, a possible aurora borealis was seen near Berwick in 1604 (and interpreted as angelic armies fighting in the sky), the great Johannes Kepler (the Imperial Astronomer) observed a supernova in 1604, and a great porpoise and a whale were caught up the Thames in 1606, which many believed were in fact secret weapons invented by the Spanish General Spinola. In 1605, Stone, a clown, was whipped publicly for "a blasphemous speech". All of these Sir Pol interprets as being important portents or parts of a much greater conspiracy. A lot of the fears of cryptic information coming in through bits of vegetables from the Low Countries echoes common fears in the aftermath of 1605's Gunpowder Plot. The reference to the Malamuchi (slaves who led a revolution in thirteenth century Egypt) seems completely ludicrous, as does the reference to baboons.

The reference to Stone cutting his vegetables like his person is echoed in Shakespeare's Cymbeline Act Four Scene Two, where Innogen is described as "cut[ting] our roots in characters,/ And sauced our broths, as Juno had been sick
And he her dieter."

ACT TWO SCENE TWO:

The servants set up a scaffold stage (such as travelling players would have put up in Jonson's youth), for Volpone to play Scoto of Mantua (a famous conman/juggler from Elizabethan England). Jonson could be implying that Volpone was really Scoto, or just that the names were so totally interchangeable (like in modern wrestling).

Like alchemists, target of Jonson's comedy about a year later, many people regarded Mountebanks as the repository of all lost knowledge, while others (like Peregrine and Jonson himself) regarded them as shysters.

The Mountebank scene, as Alvin Kernan of Yale University showed, steals from both the beast traditions of Aesop etc and the Commedia dell'arte styles (he even refers to his servants as "Zanies") but also builds an extended metaphor of Jonson himself: (a) he would like to be presented his work to an expensive, University educated (Blackfriars) audience, but is instead hawking it to the plebs at The Globe; (b) scorning his less scholarly competitors (Marston,

Dekker, even Shakespeare) who parade second-rate and plagiarised goods (compare the content of what Scoto says with the content of the Prologue or, even more, of Jonson's *Epistle*). The fact that the worth of both entrance to the play at The Globe and Scoto's Oil is sixpence supports this interpretation.

Cardinal Pietro Bembo was an important Renaissance scholar, poet and (importantly) co-creator of madrigal style music, and (as implied here) lover of Lucrezia Borgia, daughter of Pope Alexander VI. He was also important in reviving the reputations of both Boccaccio & Petrarch.

Alessandro Buttone seems to be an otherwise unknown mountebank.

Giovanni Boccaccio was one of the key authors of the fourteenth century Renaissance: his *Decameron* was a major influence on both Chaucer and Shakespeare. It is possible that this reference is to Shakespeare (like Tabarin, Anthoine Girard, another mountebank and later a character in *Commedia dell'arte*) stealing and reusing old plots.

Like a good snake-oil salesman, Scoto tells us that his oil will cure everything.

Hugh Broughton was a Puritan divine, who made attempts at translating the Hebrew Bible, but was pointedly excluded from the list of scholars invited to translate the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible. Because he was a Puritan, Jonson satirised him more at length in The Alchemist.

Hippocrates and Galen were the two most noted physicians of the ancient world, whose theories of the "Humours" influenced Jonson's earlier plays, *Every Man in His Humour* and *Every Man Out of His Humour* (in the latter of which Shakespeare is said to have acted). The idea that people are fixed in their Humour/"personality" is a commonplace of Renaissance thought, which Jonson uses in a number of his plays. Their works were still the main medical textbooks until the start of the eighteenth century. Scoto claims his oil is worth more than all their work put together, and more useful than the elixir of life, apparently discovered by the astrologer Raymond Lully, and the new medicines discovered by the sixteenth century

divine, physician, botanist and occultist Paracelsus, which he kept in a long sword.

Who Gonswart was we don't know, and may have been included in the song for the rhyme, or may have been an attempt to confuse his audience with names they haven't heard of to keep them guessing.

Cardinal Montalto was Pope Sixtus V, a financially corrupt Pope who almost bankrupted the Papal lands with his building projects and building of a standing Papal army, but also a great Latin scholar who produced a revised (and more accurate) version of St Jerome's Vulgate Bible and also translated (or at least oversaw) a definitive version of the works of St Ambrose. It is possible he is in Scoto's list as someone who spent enormous sums on new things.

The most likely Cardinal Fernese to be referred to by Scoto is Cardinal Odoardo Farnese, chiefly remembered for being Patron of the artist Caraccio, but may be a reference to his grandfather Pope Paul III, whose sister was (one) mistress of Pope Alexander VI, but who later became one of the founders of the Counter-Reformation (and also opponent of the enslaving of the American Indians). It might also be a reference to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, one of the major art collectors of the Counter-Reformation.

The Grand Duke of Tuscany at the time of the play was Ferdinando I de Medici, one of the richest (and most tolerant) rulers of the time, who offered amnesties for both Jews and heretics during his rule.

The song suggests that the main purpose of Scoto's oil is an aphrodisiac, as do the suggestions which Volpone comes up with after the handkerchief has been thrown. This leads to Celia throwing the handkerchief out of the window. Payment was often given in handkerchiefs, but leads (as in *Othello*) to Corvino's jealousy.

ACT TWO SCENE THREE:

Corvino compares himself to the cuckolded Pantalone of *Commedia dell'arte*, whose wife Franciscina is about to be seduced by the Flaminio Scoto of Mantua. Jonson is clearly making his characters aware of their own theatrical history, and making the audience aware of their own expectations.

ACT TWO SCENE FOUR:

Many scholars have seen Volpone's cry of help for his love of Celia as having classical echoes from *Odes of Anacreon* 14 & 16 (570 BC – 488 BC):
http://www.kalliope.org/vaerktoc.pl?vid=moore/1801
It is possible Volpone was deliberately based on these, but it is as likely Jonson was merely using the overblown language of the young lovers from *Commedia dell'arte*, or even echoing previous plays about young lovers, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Act Two, where both Romeo and Mercutio use overblown language to describe love, or *As You Like It*, where the language of love used by both Rosalind and Orlando is used extravagantly.

Mosca offers to "horn" Corvino (ie to cuckold him), and again it is possible this is a deliberate echo of As You Like It, where horns are mentioned repeatedly.

Volpone's mention of his "heir" reminds him of the colour of his "hair" (and possibly of his lack of "air" (for Jonson's original audience, the three words would have been interchangeable when heard).

ACT TWO SCENE FIVE:

Corvino's rant at Celia seems to be an echo of Othello's rants at Desdemona from Shakespeare's play (such as Act Four Scene Two), with Celia playing the same innocent role as Desdemona.

The chastity belt he shows her was already medieval (or perhaps legendary), but this enables Jonson to make some jokes about anal sex.

Corvino threatens to kill Celia and sell her body to anatomists (the public dismembering of bodies – specifically the bodies of the executed – had become popular spectacles in the late Elizabethan era).

ACT TWO SCENE SIX:

Putting a dying man with a young, lusty woman as a cure for impending death was not unknown to Renaissance science: the same had been recommended to Israel's King David in chapter 1 of the *First Book of Kings* (*Third Book of Kings* in the Catholic Bible):
http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=11
It was also commonplace that the way to get rid of the pox (syphilis) was for a man to have sex with a virgin (or sometimes a pre-pubescent girl).

Mosca's way of suggesting to Corvino that he give his wife to Volpone is reminiscent of both Shakespeare's Iago and Richard of Gloucester, both of them descendents of the Vice character from the Morality plays. They do not suggest the thing themselves, but lead the character to make the decision for himself, by dropping hints. They then disclaim that that was what they were intending.

ACT TWO SCENE SEVEN:

Jealousy, says Corvino, is a "poor, unprofitable humour": it is closely related to the humour of Melancholy (black bile).

ACT THREE SCENE ONE:

Mosca praises the concept of the parasite in his soliloquy: he is like all the subtle animals around. There is a suggestion of the serpent from the Garden of Eden:
http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=1&c=3

ACT THREE SCENE TWO:

Mosca says Bonario is to be declared a bastard, "the common issue of the earth" (ie fatherless).

ACT THREE SCENE FOUR:

There is the suggestion that Lady Would-Be, in order to ensnare Volpone, has taken advice from the Venetian courtesans as to how to dress attractively. Venice was known for its large number of prostitutes (both *onesta* and *di lume*), and it is difficult to know how to dress Lady Would-Be.

She is certainly wearing her "band" (neckline) way too low for English tastes (though this may be a satirical reference to the late Queen Elizabeth I's habit of wearing very low décolletage, even – according to the French ambassador – showing so much cleavage one could see the top of her pubic hair).

This may also be a reference to the long neck of a parrot: Lady Pol may be designed to resemble a parrot, and her overdone makeup may make her look more like one. She wears a large "tire" or headdress that may look like a parrot's coxcomb. The making of "tires" was a major growth area in early Jacobean England.

Volpone compares Lady Pol to one of the three Furies (the "unceasing" Alecto, the "grudging" Megaera , and Tisiphone who "avenged murder").

Lady Pol talks of the "golden mediocrity" (meaning Theophrastus' "golden mean"), unaware that gold is the one thing that distorts everything else in the play. Mediocrity does not have the negative meaning that it does in modern English.

The list of poets mentioned by Lady Pol becomes slowly more desperate, starting with the obviously great (Petrarch, Tasso, Dante) and finishing off with a pornographer (Aretine) and a well-known second-rate Italian poet (Cieco di Hadria). Jonson was known (from his *Conversations with Drummond*) to dislike Guarini's 1590 play *The Faithful Shepherd* (translated from Pastor Fido in 1602, and highly popular in London).

When she moves on to Philosophers, the joke is that she understands as little of Plato and Pythagoras as she does of the effect she is having on Volpone (or, it is implied, she had on her previous lover of six years).

ACT THREE SCENE FIVE:

Lady Pol quickly believes that her husband has run off with a courtesan. Jonson places numerous local details (gondolas, The Rialto etc) to convince us that this is really set in Venice. Compare this to some of the details Shakespeare uses in *The Merchant of Venice* Act One Scene Three, where he demonstrates much less local knowledge.

ACT THREE SCENE SEVEN:

Compare Corvino's attitude to his wife's "honour" (in this case her sexual fidelity) to Falstaff's position on "honour" (in his case, military honour and respect) in *Henry IV Part One*, Act Five Scene One:
http://www.online-literature.com/shakespeare/henryIV1/15/

Celia, like a good Catholic girl and like Desdemona just before her death, calls on "heaven and saints":
http://www.shakespeare-literature.com/Othello/15.html

Corvino's attitude is a mirror image of Othello's, almost to the point of parody. He asks her to remember her wedding vow to obey him.

It is worth comparing Celia's attitude in this scene with the slightly different behaviour of Lucrezia in Machiavelli's *La Mandragola*. Jonson might well be parodying this play, or others like it, in this scene.

Volpone compares himself to the water-gods Proteus or Achelous, both notable for their ability to change shape. Achelous changed shape repeatedly when battling with Hercules for the love of Deianeira, daughter of Oeneus King of Calydon. It is noticeable that Hercules beat Achelous and married Deianeira himself. Jonson may be setting up Celia's rescue by Bonario in this line.

Volpone gives us some indication of his past here: he was an actor who performed the part of Antinous in front of Henry Valois (later Henry III of France, but at that point King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania) in Venice in 1574. The Antinous mentioned may be either the manly suitor to Penelope, wife of Ulysses, or the catamite of the Emperor Hadrian. Again, this ambiguity is almost certainly deliberate: was Volpone a well-known "manly" actor or previously a boy-actor specializing in effeminate parts? The latter suggestion seems slightly more likely by the mention of Henry III, who was certainly accused of effeminacy, and was widely rumoured to be exclusively homosexual.

The song to Celia is very likely a version of Catullus' *Ode 5*, with the idea that time is running out, so we shall have to love now (a commonplace argument in many poems of this time)
http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Catullus.htm
The song was set to music by Jonson's friend Antonio Ferrabosco, and Jonson later had it published in his book of poems, The Forest.

Volpone's offer to spend enormous sums to win Celia's love deliberately reduces everything to a financial transaction (echoing the opening scene). He tries to make it sound more romantic by comparing her to the fabled beauty Cleopatra, who famously dissolved pearls in vinegar in order to spend a fortune on her meal, and Lollia Paulina, lover of the Emperor Caligula who adorned herself with more jewels ever seen before (both according to Pliny).

Volpone neglects to mention that these were famously lascivious "mistresses" (rather than wives), both of whom eventually committed suicide. He also offers her a ruby larger than the ones in St Marks' eyes in the Cathedral (suggesting that, in Venice, money can make even a saint look the other way). He would serve her roasted Phoenix (a bird that only appears every five hundred years), even if it meant killing the species.

Volpone offers to change shape (does this mean sexual role-play?) like the gods from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.
http://www.elizabethanauthors.com/ovid00.htm
His exploration of the different types of sexual behaviour they could indulge in suggests the degradation suggested in the speech on Pythagoras in Act One Scene Two, starting as the King of the Gods, and finishing up as "some quick negro, or cold Russian".

Celia's speech (lines 239-2259) is one of the few areas where the Quarto and the *Works* editions are very different, and it is mostly in the punctuation. The Quarto edition has lots of dashes, suggesting Celia is having trouble marshalling her thoughts, and possibly breathing heavily in terror; the *Works* has much stronger (and more obvious) punctuation, suggesting that Celia knows what she is saying. There is an argument about which is the superior reading, probably based on whether the reader believes Jonson wanted a stronger or a more "innocent" heroine.

Volpone explicitly breaks the second commandment (Exodus 20:4) here:
http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=2&c=20
and it is possible that this scene shows him either explicitly or implicitly committing all the seven deadly sins. Is this scene the moral centre of this play?

Bonario's language and behaviour explicitly echoes the overdone rhetoric of the young lover character from *Commedia* sources.

ACT THREE SCENE EIGHT:

Dying like Romans meant suicide. In his tragedy, *Sejanus His Fall* (first produced in 1603), Jonson had a number of the characters kill themselves. Living like Greeks was more to do with both the mistrust people had of Greeks telling lies, and of their (supposedly) lascivious lifestyle.

The fear of branding for crimes was a real one: Jonson himself had been branded on the thumb for killing another actor (Gabriel Spencer) in 1598.

ACT THREE SCENE NINE:

Mosca compares both Corbaccio and Volpone to the "whitened sepulchres" complained of by Jesus in *Matthew* 23:27:
http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=1&b=1&c=23
They are fine on the outside, but rotten within.

ACT FOUR SCENE ONE:

Sir Pol's advice to Peregrine to profess no religion was one of the vices that contemporary English (and other) people saw in Venice: because Venice was so important for trade, it was open to people of all religions (and thus was often excommunicated by the Papacy). Machiavelli argued that politics had to be more important than religion (as a loyal servant of Pope Alexander's son Cesare, that was an unexpected conclusion): Jean Bodin argued for toleration in religion. Both these positions were quite shocking to many in Jonson's time, especially after the Gunpowder Plot, even though he, as a Catholic, would have benefited from them.

Cardinal Gasparo Contarini was Cardinal of Venice, and leading light in the early attempts at the Catholic Church's Counter-Reformation. He published a guide to Venice, which had been translated into English in 1599, fifty years after Contarini's death.

Sir Pol's attitude to "The Jews" reflects a much more accurate Venetian attitude than that presented in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Jews' exclusion from canon law's banning on usury (lending money for interest) meant that they were essential to Venice's economy, even if they were by law obliged to live in the Ghetto.

Sir Pol's comments on his ships coming in safely (that he only needs one to make a profit) could again be a satirical reference to Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, or it could again be a comment on how stupid all Sir Pol's schemes are. Certainly, his comments on how tinderboxes should be banned are supposed to reflect how he understands nothing of the way the city operates.

ACT FOUR SCENE TWO:

There was a tradition that Venetian prostitutes would cross-dress: indeed, the Carnivale was seen as particularly scandalous, as people could spend days dressed in costumes of the wrong gender.

Lady Pol has read Castiglione's guide to civilised and courtly behaviour, *The Courtier*, but, in her behaviour towards Peregrine, shows that she has not taken much of it on board.

Lady Pol compares Peregrine to the Emperor Nero's eunuch Sporus.

It has been suggested that the actor playing Peregrine was the grown-up boy-actor who played Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* seven years before, and that this scene was an in-joke for members of the King's Men. If we are meant to find the mistaking of Peregrine for a woman realistic, the actor would have to have retained his ability to play female parts into his twenties. It might be, as his name implies, that we have another boy-actor here (who might have played women in other King's Men plays) so the company clearly had some very talented boy-players on board at this point. Jonson had elsewhere written for companies of boy-players.

ACT FOUR SCENE FOUR:

Mosca's difficult task here is to keep all three "heirs" believing themselves the sole heir while they work together.

Mosca invokes classical myth to back up his points: Mercury was both the God of eloquence and god of thieves, and Hercules was supposed to have become father of the Celtic people of France late in life, as he became less strong, his oratorical skills became better.

ACT FOUR SCENE FIVE:

The judges ("fatherhoods", so more likely to support Corbaccio anyway) find Bonario's story so unlikely that there are hardly words to describe it.

It is worth comparing Voltore's speech in the Venetian court with Portia's similar speeches in *The Merchant of Venice*, replacing Mercy with Truth (which of course is lies):
http://www.online-literature.com/shakespeare/merchant/18/
Portia's "Daniel come to judgement" is supposedly Balthazar, a young lawyer, defeating the old Jew Shylock. Jonson has a chiastic parallel with this in that his lawyer is older, prosecuting a young man/woman mix, Bonario & Celia.

Lots of the language of this scene is to do with how "unnatural" everyone's behaviour is: Voltore prepared to speak against anyone, including God, if the pay is right, Bonario's attempted parricide, Celia's wish not to be a "creature" of God etc.

Corvino compares Celia to a partridge (according to Pliny, the most sexually active of all the creatures) who neighs like a small horse during sex.

ACT FOUR SCENE SIX:

Lady Pol accuses Celia of being a chameleon (painting herself into something she is not), a hyena (feeding on dead flesh and trapping people by her human-sounding voice) and a crocodile (crying false tears for her victims). By the end of this scene, all these are good descriptions of Lady Pol herself.

In a traditional *Commedia*, Bonario & Celia would be young lovers, kept apart by evildoers. Samuel Taylor Coleridge even suggested rewriting the play so that Celia was Corvino's niece or ward, and felt Jonson had missed a trick by not applying this option. Jonson, of course, knows what his audience is expecting, and deliberately undermines that.

ACT FIVE SCENE ONE:

In Aesop's story of *The Fox and the Crow*, the Fox is caught out after playing dead.

ACT FIVE SCENE TWO:

Volpone suggests that Corvino will run around with a rope and a dagger, symbols of suicidal madness that Jonson would remember from playing Hieronimo in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*.

Volpone compares gold to Cestus' girdle (from Homer's Iliad, Ch14) which restores people's youth and desire (and desirability). This reference was so obscure that in the *Works* edition of the play, someone had put a liner note making sure that readers understood. This suggests that readers were expected to understand the other classical references in the play.

Gold also has the power to pass through any guards, like Jupiter passing Acrisius' guards as a shower of gold, in order to impregnate Danae with the hero Perseus.

ACT FIVE SCENE THREE:

Lady Pol asks "Is his thread spun?" evoking a reference to the three Fates (Clotho, Achesis and Atropos) respectively who weaved, measured and cut the thread of each person's life. This is a typically overblown way of expressing herself, but she may also be subconsciously measuring the gorgeous threads of the room. That is certainly what Mosca's line implies.

Volpone's line "some strange storm, the ship is lost" may be a reference to Antonio's fate in *The Merchant of Venice*. Many Venetians made their money by trade; many more made theirs by financial speculation.

Mosca's accusation that Corbaccio has three legs is an echo of the Riddle of the Sphinx to Oedpius.

Volpone's wish to turn Mosca into a Venus reflects the idea that flies were considered hermaphrodite in the seventeenth century, a reflection of the sexual perversion theme that runs through *Volpone*.

ACT FIVE SCENE FOUR:

The Book of Voyages, mentioned as a book Sir Pol might write of his terrified flight to the relatively local Aleppo or Zant, might be a reference to texts such as Sir John Mandeville's or Marco Polo's, both of which contain accurate historical and geographical information, combined with bizarre and totally untrue traveller's tales. Mandeville was mostly accepted as accurate when it first came out, but has been shown to have a lot of traveller's tales in it; Polo's was mostly seen as fiction, but later discoveries have verified most of the details of the stories in it. Books of travellers' tales were an increasingly popular read for the educated Englishman in the late sixteenth century, largely because movement was quite limited by limits on travelling within Catholic countries. Thomas Coryat had published in 1611 a book of his own travels (*Coryat's Crudities: Hastily Gobbled up in Five Months' Travels*), which included his (self-aggrandised) version of his "heroic" trip to Venice, which he dedicated to Henry, Prince of Wales, who engaged a number of wits, including Ben Jonson to write mocking panegyrics to the author and his travels:
http://www.archive.org/details/coryatscrudities01coryuoft

Fear of spies for "The Turk" was terrifying to Venetians: contemporary plays such as *Othello* or *The Jew of Malta* deal with fear of the Ottoman Empire. Despite the (now seen as decisive) sea Battle of Lepanto was in 1571, in which Venice took part, where the Turkish Navy were roundly defeated, fear of Turkish resurgence was widespread across Europe. To be a spy for the Turk in Venice was equivalent to being a spy for Catholic Spain in England at the time.

Jonson always complained people were reading unintended political meanings into his plays.

The suggestion that Sir Pol should hide in a "frail" or basket of rushes suggests echoes of the story of the birth of Moses.
http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=2&c=2

The Merchants want to see a show like the torture of Sir Pol as puppet show, like the ones they had at Fleet Street during court "terms" or at Smithfield Market, home of his later play, *Bartholomew Fair*.
http://hollowaypages.com/jonson1692bartholmew.htm

ACT FIVE SCENE SEVEN:

Like Dogberry in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* Act Three Scene Three, Volpone's Commendatore uses malapropisms (in this case "decrease" for "increase"), but they actually express what he means.
http://shakespeare.mit.edu/much_ado/much_ado.3.3.html
Is this dramatic irony, or just irony?

ACT FIVE SCENE EIGHT:

Volpone's Commendatore raises Aesop's tale of *The Fox and the Crow* as a way to wind up Corvino and Corbaccio.
http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Aesop/Aesops_Fables/The_Fox_and_the_Crow_p1.html
What makes this even more of an in-joke is that Horace in his *Satires* (2:5:55-7) writes a story very similar to this one: a man marries his beautiful daughter to a rich old man in the hope of inheriting when he dies, but ends up getting nothing.
http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/bl/bl_text_horace_sat2.htm#satire5

ACT FIVE SCENE NINE:

Volpone makes a joke at Voltore's expense about "a mule/ That never read Justinian" mounting the Advocate. The notion is "You're screwed" by someone not knowledgeable in the law. Emperor Justinian I was a great legal reformer, whose sixth century *Corpus Juris Civilis* is still the basis of the law in many countries, and whose Roman Law was the basis of most European law until the *Code Napoleon*.

ACT FIVE SCENE TWELVE:

The details of demonic possession were well-known in books such as *Daemonologie* by King James I (written when he was still James VI of Scotland).
http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/kjd/
Is Jonson's attitude towards demons (which seems to us perfectly rational) a way of (again) pointing out the shortcomings and idiocies of the little Scottish King of England? Corvino's comment that "he has been, often, subject to these fits" is an echo of Lady Macbeth's comment about her husband (another Scottish King) in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, Act Three Scene Four:
http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.3.4.html
Jonson had spent time in prison for co-authoring a play (*Eastward Ho!*) which satirised the Scots. Is he still continuing this vein of comedy?

Mosca, like Iago, is severely punished for getting above his station. For Jonson, it is much more clearly a class-based punishment than it is for Shakespeare.

When Sir Thomas Sutton (who, like Volpone, had had a number of people rewrite their wills to make him their heir, and thus ended up very rich indeed) died, he left his money to found Charterhouse Hospital. Jonson specifically (in his *Epistle*) denies that Volpone is based on Sutton, but there are a number of similarities in their lives.

The Avocatori finish with a statement about "Mischiefs feed/ Like beasts", suggesting a return to an Aesop reading of the story.

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