

## Summary and Questions on Volpone

### THE ARGUMENT & THE PROLOGUE:

Jonson opens his comedy with an acrostic on the name *Volpone* (the play, rather than the character, in the classical tradition of Plautus).

We open on a Prologue, spoken probably by one or all of Volpone's servants, Nano, Androgyno & Castrone. It is written in the same (slightly clunky) style as their show to Volpone in Act One Scene Two. In it, they tell us how much better a playwright Ben Jonson is than all of those around him.

They claim (though this is untrue for this play, mostly because of the Sir Politic subplot) that Jonson is a better playwright, because he follows Aristotle's Unities of Time and Place.

### QUESTIONS:

Is the Argument anything more than a clever way of showing off that Jonson can do acrostics? Is there a dramatic reason for having the Argument at the start of the play? If you were directing the play, what would you do with the Argument?

Why does Jonson follow the Classical Argument with such a clunkily written Prologue? How funny is the Prologue?

Why does Jonson claim to follow the "laws of time, place, persons", when he doesn't in this play?

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Now that the “War of the Theatres” has been over for at least four hundred years, is the Prologue still relevant or interesting? If you were directing this play, what would you do with this opening?

### **ACT ONE SCENE ONE:**

Mosca pulls back the curtains on the bed, to reveal Volpone on his bed.

Volpone performs a kind of blasphemous “Matins prayer” to the glories of Gold, then goes on to explain how he gets his enormous wealth through trickery.

His soliloquy explains how he tricks people into giving him enormous bribes: he pretends to be dying (and without an heir), so that people compete in giving him gifts, which they hope to get back tenfold.

### **QUESTIONS:**

Volpone’s opening Prayer could be seen as shocking to his audience, many of whom were either Catholic or sympathetic towards Catholicism (even if illegally). Do we get the impression that Jonson is mocking Catholicism and Catholic ritual, or is this all part of his idea that Volpone is so degenerate that he has replaced God with Gold? How much does this lead to the idea of demonic possession that features heavily later in the play?

Modern internet and email scams work by very much the same principle as Volpone’s: people are persuaded to put up “a small amount” with the hope of receiving a much larger sum in the near future. The closer they get to receiving the “fortune” they have been promised, the larger the sums are they have to pay out. Do people change, or is the desire to be cheated a human universal?

**ACT ONE SCENE TWO:**

Nano (the dwarf), Androgyno (the hermaphrodite) and Castrone (the eunuch) perform a little piece for Volpone & Mosca. While claiming it is “neither play, nor university show”, the cluster of Classical references makes it more suitable for a university audience.

They mock the teachings of Pythagoras, and finish up with a song about how fools are the only nation of the world worth respecting.

They are interrupted by the arrival of Voltore, the lawyer, who has brought Volpone an enormous plate, in the hope of being made his heir.

Volpone dresses as a sick and dying man, to entice Voltore more.

**QUESTIONS:**

A Jester or “Fool” had an important place in a medieval court. His role as a licensed comedian allowed him to mock the seriousness of the ruler (King, Duke, Emperor etc), and sometimes to tell the ruler where he was going wrong, being too arrogant or being stupid. It was sometimes therefore a dangerous job to have. Why do you think a very powerful man might want to keep a “Fool” around?

Similarly, a ruler might keep a “cripple”, a dwarf, a gibbous (hunchback) or an “idiot” (mentally handicapped person) in court. Why do we think Jonson made Volpone keep these three around?

Why does Jonson spend so much time making jokes at the expense of Pythagoras (a philosopher who had died two thousand years before)? How much is this to do with the idea that all the characters in the play had “animal” souls? How close are we to the animals in behaviour and attitude?

**ACT ONE SCENE THREE:**

Voltore (the vulture-advocate), the first of Volpone's "heirs" is shown in.

Mosca tells him clearly that he is Volpone's heir, and asks that he be remembered when Voltore comes into his money. Mosca tells him that Volpone always admired his oratorical skills, and his ability to support both sides at once, with a "forked counsel".

**QUESTIONS:**

Why does Voltore not realise he is being tricked? Why does he not realise he is being insulted by Mosca?

Voltore is clearly a vulture. If you were directing the play, how "human" and how "birdlike" would you have him played? Would you have him masked, like in a *Commedia dell'arte* play?

To what extent is Voltore merely a version of the *Commedia Il Dottore* character? How much education does he really have?

**ACT ONE SCENE FOUR:**

Corbaccio (a partially deaf old man) tries to give Volpone drugs to “cure” him. Renaissance medicine was notorious at being very kill-or-cure, and Corbaccio obviously hopes for the former. He is worried about Voltore’s motives, so has given Volpone a large bag of Chequins (gold was supposed to bring health).

Mosca persuades Corbaccio to disinherit his own son and to make Volpone his heir. Thus, when Volpone dies and he inherits his estate, Corbaccio’s son will inherit even more. Corbaccio claims the credit for this great idea.

With Corbaccio agreeing to this scheme, Volpone and Mosca celebrate the stupidity of their “heirs”, and how wrapped up in their sin they are and thus so easy to be tricked. Volpone does not notice that Mosca is using almost identical flattery on him.

Volpone has to start pretending again, as Corvino arrives.

**QUESTIONS:**

How “Raven-like” is Corbaccio? Ravens were supposed to neglect their own offspring.

In Commedia, the Pantalone character was always in love-rivalry against his own son. He was a deluded old man who thought people were attracted to him for his personality, when really they were just after his money. How much is Corbaccio a typical Pantalone? Should he be played in a commedia style?

How deliberate is Mosca’s flattery of Volpone? How much is he tricking Volpone in the way Volpone has just tricked his Corbaccio?

How deliberate is Jonson’s reference to the Seven Deadly Sins in this scene? Why?

**ACT ONE SCENE FIVE:**

Corvino (the crow-merchant) arrives and gives the “dying” Volpone a pearl and a diamond.

Mosca tells Corvino that Volpone has named him as heir, disinheriting even his dwarf, his hermaphrodite and his eunuch, who (it is rumoured) are his illegitimate children.

Mosca encourages Corvino to express his real feelings for the dying Volpone, and Corvino joins in, calling him revolting names.

When Mosca mentions Corvino’s wife, Corvino gets worried and runs out.

A fourth visitor, the English wife of Sir Politic Would-Be, is rejected.

Mosca compares the ugly Lady Would-Be to the beauty of Corvino’s wife, and Volpone is determined to meet her, despite all the guarding Corvino does of her.

**QUESTIONS:**

As Corvino later gives Volpone his wife, is it relevant that he now gives Volpone “two stones”?

How much does Corvino enjoy insulting Volpone? How much does he do of it, compared to Mosca?

How much of what Mosca says are his own real feelings?

How would the line “affect strange airs” be said to gain maximum laughs?

Crows were supposed to be images of sexual fidelity. How does Corvino match this image? How much is Corvino supposed to be acted as a crow?

**ACT TWO SCENE ONE:**

This scene introduces the subplot (already mentioned in the previous scene) involving the (conspiracy theorist & tourist) Sir Politic Would-Be and Peregrine. Sir Politic tells Peregrine that he has only come to Venice on a whim of his wife's.

From the questions he asks Peregrine, Peregrine decides Sir Pol is a know-nothing conspiracy theorist, seeing omens and plots where there are none, while his wife has come here to spy out the latest fashions (from the local prostitutes). Sir Pol fails to realise that (a) his wife is being insulted and (b) that Peregrine is mocking him.

Rather than following all the plots that have been going on, Peregrine has prepared for his travels by learning Italian. Sir Pol mocks him for his lack of understanding.

**QUESTIONS:**

A Peregrine is a kind of hawk or falcon, used for falconry to strike down other birds: how much does Peregrine fit this description?

Peregrinations are travels: is Peregrine just a traveller? Does he have a purpose?

Sir Politic doesn't seem to represent an animal. Many directors have seen him as a parrot. Is this a good way to see him? How many parrot qualities does he have?

Presumably there were people in Jonson's audience who also believed in the same portents and conspiracies as Sir Pol. How insulting is Peregrine to Jonson's audience?

**ACT TWO SCENE TWO:**

They are interrupted by the arrival of Volpone's servants, setting up a bank for their Mountebank (a kind of a quack doctor).

Sir Pol is impressed; Peregrine is not.

Volpone lowers the price of the oil until all can afford it. His oil, he says, can cure all ills, including sexual impotence.

Celia, Corvino's wife, throws a handkerchief and money to the mountebank for some of the oil. Volpone sees her.

**QUESTIONS:**

Why does Jonson spend so much time on this scene? How much knowledge is he expressing in this speech, and how much is spurious knowledge?

Celia throws her money and handkerchief at the point when Volpone starts talking about the sexual powers of the oil. Does Corvino object to the handkerchief being thrown as an erotic symbol in itself, or is the suggestion that he is the one that needs an aphrodisiac-stimulant himself, to satisfy Celia? Does this suggest different motivations for Celia? Or Corvino?



**ACT TWO SCENE THREE:**

Corvino beats down the mountebank, and compares the characters in the scene to stock characters from the Commedia Dell'Arte tradition.

**QUESTIONS:**

Corvino clearly imagines himself in a standard Commedia situation. How realistic is this supposed to be? Do people ever imagine themselves as characters in traditional stories? How much is Corvino a typical Pantalone character?

Why does Jonson deliberately make us so aware of the dramatic tradition he is borrowing from? Is there a sense in which the *verfremdungseffekt* (reminding us that we are watching a play, not reality) he is using here helps to undermine our expectations later?

**ACT TWO SCENE FOUR:**

Volpone uses extravagant language to express his desire for Celia, and offers Mosca all his money so that he can attain her. Mosca has a better idea, to cuckold Corvino. Volpone worries someone might have seen through his disguise.

**QUESTIONS:**

Does Volpone really mean what he says about his love for Celia? Compare his language to what Mosca says: how much more pecuniary is Mosca in attitude?

Many scholars have seen this moment as Volpone's *hamartia*, after which he is doomed. Do you think this is fair? Could he change his fate at this point?

**ACT TWO SCENE FIVE:**

Corvino rants at Celia for being so sluttish as to come to the window and throw a handkerchief to the mountebank. She protests her innocence. He threatens to become even more strict, put her in a chastity belt which only opens from behind, and sell her body to anatomists.

They are interrupted by the arrival of Mosca.

**QUESTIONS:**

How innocent is Celia? Is her behaviour as pure as she makes out? How innocent is the bit with the handkerchief really?

The name Celia suggests she is heavenly or from the sky. How ironic is this name?

**ACT TWO SCENE SIX:**

Corvino expects news of Volpone's death, but Mosca tells him Scoto's Oil has brought Volpone back to life. The doctor's recommendation is that he needs a young, lusty woman to sleep with him. It can't be a prostitute, because she might tempt him to change the will in her favour: it has to be someone innocent.

Corvino comes up with the idea of sending his wife to bring Volpone back to life.

**QUESTIONS:**

It was a seventeenth (and eighteenth) century 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). If this is what is being proposed, it changes the nature of Corvino's and Celia's relationship: has their marriage not been consummated?

Or is the point that having sex with a married woman a quicker way to bring on his death?

How keen is Corvino to prostitute his wife? It does not take him long to decide? How crow-like is he?

**ACT TWO SCENE SEVEN:**

Corvino tells Celia he was only joking, and that she should dress up smart to see one of his best friends.

**QUESTIONS:**

Does Celia believe Corvino's supposed change of heart and new behaviour? Which is stronger dramatically? If you were playing Celia, how would you play her attitude?

**ACT THREE SCENE ONE:**

Mosca's soliloquy: he is in love with himself: he praises the role and concept of the parasite.

**QUESTIONS:**

To what extent are we supposed to like or approve of Mosca? Like the Vices from the old Morality entertainments, he is really attractive to an audience, because he lets us (but not the characters on stage) into his secrets.

**ACT THREE SCENE TWO:**

Mosca meets Bonario, Corbaccio's son, who attacks him for being a parasite. Mosca admits to him all his faults, but explains it is only out of necessity that he behaves like this. He makes Bonario repent for having judged him so harshly.

Having admitted how he lies and flatters to make people believe him, Mosca then lies and flatters Bonario to make Bonario believe him. He tells Bonario that his father means to disinherit him: Bonario initially refuses to believe him, but Mosca offers to hide him where he can hear Corbaccio change his will.

**QUESTIONS:**

According to John Florio, Bonario means "debonair, honest, good, uncorrupt" but also had implications of stupid, naïve or a bit simple. From our first meeting with Bonario, do we think these are good descriptions? Which is more accurate?

Bonario's name also implies "the good (bon) heir". Is there a sense in which he should succeed to Volpone's money? Does it also imply he has "good hair"?

Bonario seems, by modern standards, to be an incredible snob. In a city made entirely of merchants and self-made men, he really looks down on Mosca's baseness. How is his behaviour excusable, especially when Mosca appears to be doing him a favour?

Mosca admits (in negative terms) all the things he was boasting about in scene one. How effective psychologically do you think his behaviour is? How many of your faults do you have to admit before people will believe you?

**ACT THREE SCENE THREE:**

Volpone is being entertained by his Zanies, while waiting for Mosca, when the other woman, Lady Would-Be, arrives.

**QUESTIONS:**

How does Nano's speech help to advance this scene? How much dramatic irony is there in this scene?

**ACT THREE SCENE FOUR:**

Lady Would-Be, dressed for the occasion, turns up to seduce Volpone.

However Volpone tries to make her shut up, Lady Pol takes it as an opportunity to talk more. She talks of music, of Italian poets, of philosopher, of her previous lover,

**QUESTIONS:**

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. How much like a whore should she be dressed?

How much does her overdone makeup make her look like a parrot? Are both she and Sir Pol parrots? How much is her conversation parrot-like? She certainly can't stop talking.

**ACT THREE SCENE FIVE:**

Mosca comes to help Volpone out, and gets rid of Lady Pol by saying that Sir Politic has been spotted on a gondola with “the most cunning courtesan of Venice”.

Lady Pol, who has tried to win Volpone’s money by knitting him a cap, runs out after her knight.

Mosca arranges for Bonario to catch (and kill) his father Corbaccio in the process of changing his will.

**QUESTIONS:**

Lady Pol seems fine to try to seduce Volpone, but objects to Sir Pol having relations with a courtesan. Is this double standards? Why is this less expected in a woman (especially a seventeenth century woman) than in a man?

**ACT THREE SCENE SIX:**

Mosca comes in with Bonario and hides him.

**ACT THREE SCENE SEVEN:**

They are interrupted by Corvino bringing Celia too early.

Corvino behaves as though whoring his wife out to a dying friend is perfectly normal and natural. Celia, unable to believe Corvino, thinks he is making some kind of classic test of her fidelity. He tries any means to persuade her to have sex with Volpone, even threatening to brand her disobedience onto her face with nitric acid.

Mosca persuades Corvino to leave Celia with the “dying” Volpone, who immediately leaps out of bed and proposes undying love (or at least sexual passion) for her. He reveals that all his behaviour (including playing dead and playing Scoto) has been a lie, and he is now restored to life by her.

He offers her money, jewellery, anything she wants if she will sleep with him, and dismisses her cries for “conscience” as a “beggar’s virtue”.

He offers to change as a lover as quickly as Ovid’s gods did, to keep it exciting.

She refuses him, and asks him to respect her honour. He thinks she is impugning his manhood and virility, and attempts to ravish her, when he is interrupted by Bonario who leaves with Celia.

Volpone is left exposed.

**QUESTIONS:**

Corvino denies being “horn-mad” but he is clearly starting to crack up. If you were the actor playing Corvino, how would you play the beginnings of this man’s incipient madness?

Part of Corvino’s problem is that, like a classic *Commedia dell’arte* *Pantalone*, he is torn between his feelings of jealousy for his wife and desire for money that only his wife’s infidelity can bring him. How realistic is this split desire?

This is probably the best and funniest scene for the actor playing Corvino, who needs to use any persuasive art to bear on Celia. Having shown how easy it was for Mosca to convince Corvino, is he showing exactly the opposite with Corvino and Celia?



Corvino asks Celia to “redeem all”, which has both a religious and a pawnbroker sense. Does Corvino really believe that Celia is behaving irreligiously by refusing to obey him?

Does Volpone really believe he can buy sex off Celia, like he has from her husband? How much are we supposed to believe the exaggerated language of passion he is presenting?

How frightened is Celia by Volpone? The Quarto edition (1607) has Celia’s speeches broken up with dashes; the later *Works* edition (1616) has a much stronger Celia expressing her virtue in carefully considered sentences? As a director or actor, which is preferable? How would you want this scene to be played? How violent and threatening is Volpone becoming?

To what extent does this scene demonstrate Jonson’s sense of Catholic morality? Volpone either does (or offers to) commit all the seven deadly sins in this scene, as well as clearly breaking the second commandment (“Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth”). Celia’s name suggests she is “of heaven”. Is this scene the moral centre of the play?

Up until this point we have been encouraged to like, admire or sympathise with Volpone. He is now revealed as an attempted rapist. Do we still have the same feelings about him? How funny is this scene supposed to be? Can showing an attempted rape on stage be funny?

Bonario’s salvation of Celia, in answer to her cries for “just God!”, seem to be the answer to that. How “good” is Bonario? What is he expecting as his “reward” for saving Celia?

**ACT THREE SCENE EIGHT:**

Bonario has (apparently) wounded Mosca on his way out with Celia.

Mosca suggests killing themselves.

They are interrupted by the arrival of Corbaccio.

**QUESTIONS:**

Has Mosca really been wounded? If not, why is he pretending?

**ACT THREE SCENE NINE:**

Mosca tells Corbaccio that Bonario has attacked Volpone and threatened to kill Corbaccio, because he had heard about being disinherited.

Corbaccio immediately rewrites the will to exclude his son.

Voltore has overheard this and blames Mosca, but Mosca tells him it is all for Voltore's benefit.

He also tells Voltore that Bonario has accused Volpone of attempted rape, and Voltore, as an advocate, needs to take action against Bonario in the courts.

**QUESTIONS:**

How does Mosca manage to turn Voltore around so quickly? If you were playing this scene, how would you make this (a) realistic, (b) funny?

**ACT FOUR SCENE ONE:**

Sir Politic tries to give Peregrine lessons on how to behave in Venetian society; how everything here is not as it seems, and almost everyone here is a spy of some kind.

Sir Pol has various schemes and “projects” for making lots of money in Venice, all of which are secret, so he tells them to Peregrine. One is to use an illiterate Dutch cheesemonger to import cheap red herrings from England to Venice and therefore sell them at a profit. He does not, though, have his papers on him, so details are sketchy, to the point of ludicrousness.

Sir Pol is worried about the terrorist effect of allowing people to carry tinderboxes (primitive matches) so close to the Arsenale (Venice’s shipyards), but talks of smuggling intelligence through Venice on the skins of onions.

He shows Peregrine his notes: these are not full of rich intelligence as he promises but are actually rather boring tourist’s notes about what a miserable holiday he is having.

**QUESTIONS:**

Jokes about Dutch people, Venetians and Jews seem racist and unpleasant to us. Is the point Jonson is making that Sir Pol (and English men like him) go to Italy, but learn nothing, as they are so trapped in their prejudices? Or are we supposed to laugh at his racist comments?

Why is Sir Pol convinced that he has understood more than he had? Have you ever been on holiday to a place, convinced that you understand the place, only to realise that you have missed the most important things about a country and its customs?

**ACT FOUR SCENE TWO:**

Lady Pol, sweating and with her heavy make-up dripping, catches Sir Pol with what she supposes to be a cross-dressing prostitute (Peregrine), and attempts, like St George, to save Sir Pol from his-her clutches.

Peregrine is angry at being mistaken for a prostitute, and insults Lady Pol copiously.

**QUESTIONS:**

How physically violent is this scene? How much is the violence slapstick?

How much is the silliness of the sexual violence in this scene meant to counterpoint (and bring into focus) the sexual violence of Act Three Scene Seven?

How feminine is Peregrine supposed to be? Does his name imply that he is actually still a boy, rather than a full-fledged man? Has Jonson written another comic part for the King's Men's (now very large) pool of boy-actors?

**ACT FOUR SCENE THREE:**

Lady Pol is interrupted by the arrival of Mosca, to whom she repeats her argument that Peregrine is a cross-dressing whore, and, if they won't support her, she'll declare that they have no class.

Mosca corrects her: the cunning prostitute that was after her husband is Celia, wife of Corvino, who has now been arrested.

Lady Pol apologises to Peregrine, and offers to be of service to him.

Peregrine thinks Sir Pol has set him up deliberately.

**QUESTIONS:**

How much of a snob is Lady Pol? Like Machiavelli in the previous century, she says that Venetians are not properly aristocratic as they derive all their money from trade.

How much of her apology to Peregrine is actually a sexual come-on? The language certainly could support that interpretation: "use me", "conceive", "acquaint". Does Peregrine really think Sir Pol is trying to ensnare him or is it just a device to make Peregrine want revenge?

**ACT FOUR SCENE FOUR:**

As a parallel to the previous scene, Mosca prepares everyone to tell the “formal tale” that Celia is a prostitute and Bonario is her murderous pimp.

**QUESTIONS:**

Mosca’s job in this scene is to keep all the “heirs” balanced. How successful is he?

**ACT FOUR SCENE FIVE:**

The judges of the Court seem to believe Celia & Bonario in their story, but then they hear Voltore’s eloquence and virtue.

Corbaccio attacks his own son, then Corvino accuses his wife as a nymphomaniac. Celia swoons. This is considered extra evidence for her guilt.

Mosca attests that Bonario hit him while he was attempting to defend Volpone, and also that Lady Pol saw Celia prostituting herself with Sir Pol.

**QUESTIONS:**

When Mosca says Volpone is “not able to endure the air”, does he really mean “the heir” (Bonario)? Is this another play on words here, which Mosca is so skilled in?

Voltore’s version certainly makes sense, even if it is not actually “true”. If you were the Avocatori, not knowing what has come before, which would you believe?

**ACT FOUR SCENE SIX:**

Lady Pol accuses Celia. As always with her, it is difficult to shut her up.

The only witnesses Bonario and Celia have are their own consciences.

Volpone is carried in, and is quite clearly incapable of rape. Bonario says he's faking it, so Voltore suggest Volpone is tortured to get "the truth" out of him. Maybe it will be good for him.

Celia and Bonario are led out separately for their punishment.

Everyone praises Voltore's rhetoric. Corvino goes out to declare himself a cuckold publicly: it's better than admitting he prostituted his own wife. Corbaccio pays Voltore a meagre sum for defending them.

Lady Pol suggests coming to see Volpone, but Mosca puts her off, saying that Volpone wants to change his will in her favour.

**QUESTIONS:**

Jonson makes Voltore predict his characters' end without realising that that is what he is doing. How is this use of dramatic irony effective in the play?

How pious and annoying are Celia and Bonario? Their answers are so "noble" that they annoy many audiences. Are we expected to sympathise with them or not?

To what extent is Jonson mocking lawyers and barristers, able to take anyone's side and argue it with eloquence, whatever their merits? It is highly likely that this play was, sometime in its first season, played at the Inns of Court, so with an audience largely made up of barristers: would they have seen themselves in Voltore?

Is Corbaccio starting to doubt the wisdom of his actions, or is he just naturally cheap? If he thinks he is going to inherit all of Volpone's money, why does he begrudge Voltore three chequins? To what extent is he just another tight-fisted *Pantalone*?

**ACT FIVE SCENE ONE:**

Volpone, celebrating, has a bowl of punch to calm his nerves.

**QUESTIONS:**

How drunk does Volpone become over this scene and the next one? Does this explain his over-confidence in deciding to play dead?

The saying is “Pride comes before a fall”. Are we just seeing Volpone’s massive pride? Is this actually a form of *hamartia*? *Hubris*?

In Aesop’s fables, the fox was caught out by playing dead. To what extent is Jonson merely going back to his story’s roots?



**ACT FIVE SCENE TWO:**

Volpone tells Mosca he has had such fun, it was more than if he had had sex with Celia.

Mosca tells Volpone that this is as far as they can go: they have achieved their “masterpiece”: getting four upright citizens to perjure themselves in open court, and having two innocents condemned by the courts.

Mosca thinks that Voltore should be rewarded – by being tricked even worse.

Volpone has an even better plan: he sends his Zanies out onto the streets to tell everyone he is dead, claiming that it comes from the grief of being accused in court. Meanwhile he will write a will that names Mosca as his heir, and have Mosca dress in his *Magnifico's* robes.

Volpone makes more praise of gold and its supernatural powers: it can make the old attractive again and can get through any justice.

The first of the “heirs” arrives.

**QUESTIONS:**

How many of the Ten Commandments get broken during the course of the play? What is Jonson’s attitude to the religion of the characters in the play?

The theme of “possession” comes up repeatedly in this scene, meaning not only the ownership of goods, but also the control of a person by demons. Volpone sets this up by his worship of a false idol (gold) in Act One Scene One. How much is the play about demonic possession?

Mosca suggests that Voltore was building up such an argument that he was actually sweating in court, and needed to change his shirt. How important is it that Voltore is actually quite smelly?

**ACT FIVE SCENE THREE:**

Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino & Lady Would-Be all arrive, wanting their money, but Mosca is too busy inventorying his new-found wealth, while Volpone watches, hidden.

Mosca turns them all out of “his” house, accusing Lady Pol of having offered herself sexually to him, Corvino of being a pimp to his own wife, Corbaccio of having offered to poison Volpone and of disinheriting his son, and Voltore of having perjured himself in open court. He promises Voltore he will pay him the usual fee when he employs him against anyone who disputes his claim to Volpone’s fortune.

Volpone wants to take this one stage further, and Mosca will get him dressed up as a *Commendatore* (Police Sergeant), so that Volpone can watch the proceedings in public.

**QUESTIONS:**

Why does Volpone play this joke, and why does he wish to take it so much further?

**ACT FIVE SCENE FOUR:**

We return to the counterpoint plot with Sir Pol and Peregrine. He arrives at Sir Pol's house with a Venetian merchant, telling him that he has been reported to the Senate as a spy for the Ottoman Empire.

The only place that Sir Pol can think to hide is in a large tortoise shell. He disguises himself as an enormous tortoise, while he asks Peregrine to get his wife's servants to burn his papers.

Several Merchants come on and poke and torture the "tortoise" until Sir Pol reveals himself.

He fears he is going to be the talk of all the gossip in the Republic, so he should go home.

**QUESTIONS:**

Sir Pol admits that his notes are not the notes of a spy but merely scenes copied out of playbooks. Why is it so important for Peregrine to hear this? What does it say about Jonson's attitude to other playwrights that their work is thus disparaged?

A tortoise was the sign of wise policy for Venetians. Why do we think Sir Pol has one?

Has the servant woman been watching Sir Pol's humiliation? How different would the playing of this scene be if she had been?

How much of this scene is a deliberate echo of the previous one? How much is Jonson exploring the idea of the comic counterpoint in this scene? In what ways is Peregrine a junior Volpone?

**ACT FIVE SCENE FIVE:**

Volpone has been made up like the *Commendatore*; Mosca like a *clarissimo*. Volpone goes out of the house to spread more mischief. Mosca sends the Zanies out to have fun, and then locks the house: he now has control of all Volpone's fortune.

**QUESTIONS:**

Mosca says he is "possessed" (as in he is in control of the house); there is also a suggestion, which expands during this Act, that all the characters are possessed by demons, possibly because they sold their souls for gold. In what sense are any of the characters demonstrating that they are demonically possessed?

**ACT FIVE SCENE SIX:**

Corvino & Corbaccio are waiting for their new court case against Mosca, but have to stick to their stories about Celia and Bonario, when Volpone, dressed as the *Commendatore*, comes to congratulate them on their success in their inheritance. He pretends to believe that they are lying to him about not receiving the inheritance.

**QUESTIONS:**

This scene lies heavy on the idea of disguises. Volpone, in a disguise, accuses the others of disguising how happy they are at receiving their inheritance. How does this reflect the idea of disguise throughout the play?

In a *Commedia* show, all the characters (except the young lovers) would be masked. Is this the point that Jonson is making here? Who is not in disguise/masked through the course of the play?

**ACT FIVE SCENE SEVEN:**

Volpone plays the same trick on Voltore, appearing to praise his “learned hands”, while implying that Voltore’s fingers are good at manipulating the truth. He pretends to be a suitor to Voltore about a house that he “now owns”, at the end of the fishmarket, that used to be a high-class brothel.

**QUESTIONS:**

Again the suggestion comes (this time from the disguised Volpone himself) that what killed Volpone was syphilis. Why do you think this point is made again and again? What point is Volpone making to Voltore about what he has inherited?

**ACT FIVE SCENE EIGHT:**

Corvino & Corbaccio are angry that Mosca, a parasite (of a lower class), is now walking around in “their” clothes (both what they should have inherited, and the clothes of people of their class).

When Volpone points out that Mosca has inherited everything, they threaten to beat him. He runs away.

**QUESTIONS:**

In his speech to Corvino, Volpone refers to some of the sources for the play: a tale by Aesop and a Satire by Horace. Jonson’s play is, though, a massive expansion of both sources. Is he wanting us to see (in a post-modern sense) the design of his play, or is he reminding us that this is a version of a classic tale?

Some scholars read this scene as the point in the play at which the cracks in Jonson’s structure start to show. Others have seen this as the message of Jonson’s play: don’t expect everyone to behave as they do in plays, and don’t expect a cosy moral. Life is a lot messier than that, and theatre should reflect life. In what sense do you see the play as a fable, and in what sense is it more about the characters than the message?

Bertolt Brecht’s theory of *verfremdungseffekt* suggests that we are actually brought closer to the message of the play by being reminded that the events on the stage are an illusion. Does this work in this case? Why (not)?

**ACT FIVE SCENE NINE:**

Voltore tries to attack Mosca but Volpone defends him. Voltore tries to dismiss Volpone, but Volpone keeps at him.

**QUESTIONS:**

Volpone is still behaving as though he and Mosca are in confederacy together. When does he start to realise that he has been outwitted?

**ACT FIVE SCENE TEN:**

The Avicatori are just about to sentence Bonario and Celia when Voltore, in an attempt to implicate Mosca, starts to tell the court that they are innocent. Corbaccio and Corvino are appalled, and blame the devil for possessing him. Celia thanks Heaven.

The Avicatori are impressed at Mosca's new-found wealth, and make requests for him to come to court.

Corbaccio and Corvino cannot agree on their stories.

**QUESTIONS:**

How believable is Voltore's about-face? How funny is it?

**ACT FIVE SCENE ELEVEN:**

Volpone feels himself caught in a trap of his own making, which is confirmed to him when he meets his Zanies, sent out by Mosca, who has taken their keys.

He tells them to persuade Mosca to come to court, to sort everything out.

**QUESTIONS:**

Why has Volpone behaved so stupidly? How soon should he realise that he has made a mistake in trusting Mosca?



**ACT FIVE SCENE TWELVE:**

The *Avocatori* have read Voltore's statement: Corvino tries to point out that Voltore is possessed by the devil.

When Volpone calls Mosca "The Parasite" he is corrected by the court, because Mosca is now a man of means: the class system has broken down and (in Venetian society) wealth is respectability.

Volpone tells Voltore that all this business about Mosca inheriting was merely a ruse to test Voltore's commitment, and that Volpone is still alive. In order to get out of the mess, Voltore pretends to be possessed in open court. Volpone sees incubi leaving his body.

Voltore "recovers" and tells the court that Volpone is still alive, to everyone's amazement.

Mosca arrives, and is fawned over by the *Avocatori*. Volpone tries to talk to Mosca, who bats him away, unless Volpone will give him half. Volpone refuses, so Mosca's price goes up. He asks for Volpone to be taken away and whipped.

Volpone reveals himself, and in the process reveals the sins and inadequacies of all the others.

Despite Celia's pleas for mercy, Mosca is punished by being whipped and sent to the galleys: he is a man of low birth so cannot expect any mercy.

Volpone's wealth is taken from him and given to the Hospital of the *Incurabili* (mostly sufferers from Syphilis, which was fatal until the twentieth century). He is put in prison, to remain there until he himself is sick.

Voltore is punished by being excluded from the bar, and banned from Venice.

Corbaccio is placed in the Monastery of Santo Spirito, with all his wealth given to his son.

Corvino is punished with a public humiliation followed by being almost certainly blinded by being put in the stocks and pelted with rotten fruit and eggs. He is to return Celia to her father with triple her original dowry.

**QUESTIONS:**

For Jacobean society, the “new rich” were not considered worthy of calling themselves gentlemen, so the fawning over (newly rich) Mosca by the court would have been both funny and disgusting. Does it still feel that way now?

For Jacobeans, many of whom believed fully in demonic possession as an explanation of illness and madness, how funny would it be for Voltore to fall down as though possessed? How funny is it to us now?

King James himself wrote (or had attributed to him) a book detailing the different types of demonic possession. How much is this scene a political one, mocking the King’s belief system?

Why does Mosca force Volpone to reveal himself, when it clearly means his own destruction? Is this just brinkmanship gone wrong?

Is the punishment of Mosca justice? Does Jonson want it to be?

Is Volpone’s punishment another suggestion of his own infection with syphilis? If not, why are there so many references to syphilis throughout the play?

Are any of the punishments suitable for the crimes committed? Which ones? Why?

The return of Celia with her dowry allows her to remarry. Would she want to? Is there a suggestion she should marry Bonario?

**EPILOGUE:**

Jonson, in the person of Volpone, asks for the traditional applause in rhyming iambic pentameters.



Because plays are  
written to be seen.