

BEN JONSON, *VOLPONE* AND THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

Ben Jonson's *Volpone* is the most widely taught and commonly performed English Renaissance play apart from Shakespeare. However, the dramatic circumstances of its writing are little known. Jonson wrote the play very shortly after the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, an event in which he was personally involved. This book argues that the play alludes to the Plot as openly as censorship will allow, using the traditional form of the beast fable. As a Roman Catholic himself, Jonson shared in the repression suffered by his co-religionists in the wake of the Plot, and the play fiercely satirizes the man they chiefly blamed for this, Robert Cecil. The elaborate format which Jonson devised for the 1607 edition of *Volpone*, with a dedication, Epistle and numerous commendatory poems, is reproduced here photographically, allowing the reader to appreciate Jonson's covert meanings and to approach the text as those in 1607 might have done.

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*For Claire
at last, her very own Sindy book*

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Plates 1–17 are from the Keynes copy of *Volpone*, C.07.21 in King's College Library, Cambridge. Reproduced with permission from the Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge.

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Acknowledgements

The contextual issues of *Volpone* have been with me throughout my career. I first broached them in my doctoral dissertation at the University of Nottingham, under the supervision of George Parfitt, completed in 1971 and examined with exemplary rigour by L. C. Knights. I addressed them in more detail when that dissertation was transformed into *Ben Jonson: to the First Folio* (Cambridge, 1983), in the chapter on ‘Covert Allusions’, pp. 133–55. Even then I was aware that I had neither the historical knowledge nor the critical methodology to pin these issues as effectively as I would like, though some of my insights there have survived to resurface here – I hope with greater substance and conviction. I did not address *Volpone* again in any detail until I wrote ‘The Lone Wolf: Jonson’s Epistle to *Volpone*’ (see below). A few years after that, the editors of the *Cambridge Ben Jonson* (David Bevington, Ian Donaldson and Martin Butler) invited me to work on *Volpone* for that edition, and everything published since has arisen from work for that. So in many ways this book has grown up alongside the edition, though it was only in 2005 that I recognized that these somewhat disparate works might cohere together into a book.

So the following publications lie behind parts of this book, though most have undergone significant transformations: ‘The Lone Wolf: Jonson’s Epistle to *Volpone*’ in *Refashioning Ben Jonson: Gender, Politics and the Jonsonian Canon*, edited by Julie Sanders with Kate Chedgzoy and Sue Wiseman (Macmillan, 1998), pp. 134–54, lies behind Chapter 1. ‘*Volpone* and Beast Fable: Early Modern Analogic Reading’, *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 67 (2004), 347–70, lies behind Chapter 4; ‘Jonson, Shakespeare and the Exorcists’, *Shakespeare Survey* 58 (2005), 15–22, lies behind parts of Chapter 6; ‘Venice in London, London in Venice’ in *Mighty Europe 1400–1700: Writing an Early Modern Continent*, ed. Andrew Hiscock (Oxford, Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 133–51, lies behind Chapter 5; and ‘Jonson and the Politics of Comedy’ in *Ben Jonson*

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and The Politics of Genre, ed. Tony Cousins and Alison Scott, forthcoming, lies behind part of Chapter 2. I am grateful to the editors and publishers of all these items for their permission to reuse them.

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I also wish to acknowledge the award of a Grant-in-Aid by the College of Humanities, Ohio State University, to cover the costs of reproducing the preliminary pages of the 1607 quarto of *Volpone*. I am grateful to the Librarian, and the Provost and Fellows of King's College, Cambridge, for kind permission to reproduce these pages from their Keynes C.07.21 copy; and offer special thanks to Iman Javadi for facilitating this and answering my questions. The British Library granted permission to reproduce two additional pages from their unique copy, C.12.e.17, which Jonson presented to John Florio.

A note on texts

This is a book that I hope will reach a readership beyond that of the narrow academic community. It tells a tale that ought to be better known than it is about one of our most important authors, his most famous play, and their links to one of the most charged events in English history, the Gunpowder Plot. It is therefore appropriate to use modern English in all citations. But until the new *Cambridge Ben Jonson* is published there is no comprehensive modernized edition of Jonson's works. Rather than refer readers to a range of different locations I have resolved that I shall normally cite his works from the great old-spelling edition of *Ben Jonson* by C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1925–52) – hereafter H&S – but in all instances to modernize the text myself. By 'modernize' I mean the usual substitution of u for v, i for j, the silent expansion of contractions, and the use of modern (usually lighter) punctuation; but also the silent substitution of modern words for their earlier equivalents ('than' for 'then', 'porpoise' for 'porcpoise', 'mushroom' for 'mushrump', and so on). I shall apply this not only to Jonson's plays, masques, letters and poems but also to the biographical materials they reproduce, including what H&S (I, pp. 128–78) refer to as 'Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden', a key source of our biographical knowledge of Jonson, though a problematic one. (Hereafter referenced as 'Conversations', with the H&S line-numbering, parenthetically within the text.) In this spirit I have also modernized quotations from all other authors, however they may appear in the texts from which I cite them.

The one obvious difficulty with this arrangement is the citing of *Volpone* itself. It is central to my argument that the version of the play which Jonson published in 1607 (a pocket-sized individual volume which we call a quarto) tells us more about the play's turbulent context than does the version published in the folio (large-format) volume of his *Works* (1616). But H&S reproduce the folio version, which differs from the

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quarto particularly in its preliminary pages – everything that appears before the play proper. Happily, I have been able to reproduce that critical preliminary matter – the Epistle, commendatory poems, Persons of the Comedy, Argument and Prologue – in this volume, as Plates 1–19, exactly as they appeared in 1607. So I shall cite those texts from there, but continue to modernize the language. The texts of the play proper do not vary very much between the quarto and folio versions, so I have no difficulty citing that from H&S.