

Introduction

In Vulponem

The Fox is earthed now in ground,
 Who living feared not horn nor hound;
 That kept the huntsmen at a bay,
 Before their faces seized his prey.
 Of whose successful thriving wit,
 Books have been made, and plays been writ,
 That preyed on mallard, plover, duck,
 And ever 'scaped by craft or luck . . .

S[amuel?] R[owlands?]

(From *The Curtain-Drawer of the World:
 or the Chamberlain of that Great Inn
 of Iniquity* (1612), mainly authored by
 'W[illiam] Parkes, Gentleman')

But *The Gunpowder Plot*, there was a get-penny! I have presented that to an eighteen- or twenty-pence audience nine times in an afternoon. Your home-born projects prove ever the best; they are so easy and familiar.

(Lantern Leatherhead, presenter of puppet shows, in
Bartholomew Fair (1614), 5.1.11–15)¹

Volpone is the best known, most performed and most studied of all of Jonson's plays, as it has been for the last 100 years. It has, to the best of my knowledge, been included in every anthology of English Renaissance drama ever compiled. Indeed, it is probably the best known and most performed of all early modern plays, excepting those of Shakespeare – only Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* would be likely to give it a run for the money. Yet the circumstances of the play's composition, and its relationship to the tumultuous events of the early years of the reign of King James I, are little known and rarely enquired about. This book is an attempt to put the play back into that history.

My argument, in essence, is this: that *Volpone* was written in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot (November 1605), a resonant event in English

history and one in which Ben Jonson himself was at least peripherally involved; that it is informed by the religious politics of the era, which lay behind the Plot itself and which deeply affected Jonson personally as a Roman Catholic convert in a Protestant regime; and that, inevitably in these circumstances, it reflected in significant ways on Robert Cecil (by the time of the Plot, Earl of Salisbury), son of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and chief minister both to Elizabeth I in the last years of her life and to James I for the first nine years of his English reign. Given the constraints of censorship in the era – to which Jonson alludes in his Epistle to the published text of the play – and the demands of simple prudence (Jonson was, at the time, attempting to consolidate his position as a regular writer of masques and entertainments at court), he could not address these issues openly or risk affronting Cecil. These conditions predicated some of the distinctive characteristics of the drama he produced, including its highly unusual adoption (for a play) of a beast fable format and its highly particularized setting in a foreign locale, Venice. They also gave rise to the extremely elaborate apparatus with which Jonson surrounded the play when he first printed it in 1607. It is my contention that this material – especially the Epistle, commendatory poems and the Prologue – would have alerted initiate readers to the play's subtexts. As I shall demonstrate, a good deal of this would, in all probability, have been apparent in general terms to the audience which saw the first performances, early in 1606. But the printed text encourages readers to sharpen and define their responses.

My aim is to make you one of those initiate readers.

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A brief word, firstly, about Robert Cecil, who would have been extremely familiar to those readers, but is nothing like as well known today as his father. I shall explain in due course (mainly in Chapter 2) why the Cecils were particularly disliked by Roman Catholics, who accused them of fomenting anti-Catholic feeling and legislation to secure their own power and to line their own pockets. That apart, both inevitably attracted the envy and hatred that invariably focus on those who enjoy power for so long: between them, father and son were effectively first minister of England from 1558 to 1612. The fact that they were not born to that privileged position – William Cecil emerged from the lower gentry and was in the line of Tudor self-made men, like Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell – only intensified the ill-will towards them. Robert Cecil, moreover, was hunchbacked, which made him an over-easy target

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for any disgruntled satirist. On his death in 1612 an unprecedented torrent of libels about him circulated in manuscript: I shall refer to them in due course.

Jonson's own view of Cecil is, as we shall see, a central issue in this book. Cecil employed him in a variety of capacities and he wrote a number of poems in praise of the minister. On the other hand, as a Roman Catholic who suffered under penalties fostered by Cecil and his father, Jonson may not have personally felt well-disposed towards him. It is certainly apparent that *after Cecil's death*, like so many others, he had nothing positive to say about him. In the *Epigrams*, apparently ready for the press in 1612 but not actually printed until the 1616 *Works*, Jonson pointedly followed two of those poems of praise, Epigram 63, 'To Robert, Earl of Salisbury' and 64, 'To the Same, Upon the Accession of the Treasurership to Him', with 65, 'To My Muse', which opens: 'Away, and leave me, thou thing most abhorred, / That hast betrayed me to a worthless lord' and ends with the universal escape-clause for all who write panegyric: 'Who'er is raised / For worth he has not, he is taxed [i.e. criticized], not praised' (H&S, VIII, pp. 47–8).² To William Drummond in 1618/19 Jonson confided that 'Salisbury never cared for any man longer nor he could make use of him' ('Conversations', lines 353–4) and told a revealing anecdote:

Being at the end of my Lord Salisbury's table with Inigo Jones, and demanded by my Lord why he was not glad. 'My Lord', said he, 'You promised I should dine with you, but I do not', for he had none of his meat. He esteemed only that his meat which was of his own dish. ('Conversations', lines 317–21)

A key question is whether Jonson's feelings about Cecil were as negative as this in 1606, albeit not openly expressed, or whether they developed later.

My first epigraph, '*In Vulponem*' by 'S. R.', was printed in the year of Cecil's death. Unlike the more virulent libels that circulated in manuscript, it has the hallmark prudential indeterminacy of more discreet early modern commentary, which we will find repeatedly in *Volpone*: no names are named and the author uses only initials, which may or may not be his own. Nevertheless, it comes from the kind of book that Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would have quickly identified as 'some satire, keen and critical' (5.1.54).³ And despite the discretion, readers in 1612 would have almost certainly recognized it as commenting on the recently dead Robert Cecil, the crafty fox who (some said) had so brazenly preyed on the defenceless for so long. The

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main reason for supposing that is, in fact, the fox persona. As Anthony G. Petti observed:

In a court frequently torn by factions, the opposing parties, influenced by the Queen's usage, readily turned to beast nick-names as a weapon of ridicule and abuse. This was especially true of the last decade of the [sixteenth] century when rivalries were at their height, the chief users being the followers of the Earl of Essex, [the] leading opponent of the Cecils – Lord Burghley, regarded by many as the real power behind the throne, and his younger son, Robert Cecil, who gradually assumed his father's mantle of authority . . . [Burghley's] chief name, which, coming from his enemies, ranks almost as a compliment, was 'the old fox', as Essex himself called him.⁴

We will see when we come to those posthumous libels that Robert Cecil inherited his father's nickname.

Of course, any wily old politician is liable to be dubbed 'the fox'. There is certainly evidence that Sir Walter Raleigh was sometimes so-called, among others. This affords a safety-net of indeterminacy for 'S. R.'. Yet the nickname stuck to the Cecils more persistently than to anyone else, which is of course critically important in relation to *Volpone, or, The Fox*. 'The Fox' is in fact the header that runs above every page of the text of Jonson's play, and there is some evidence that it is the title by which the play was better known. And S. R.'s poem comes tantalizingly close to linking *his* fox with that in *Volpone*. The title, 'In Vulponem', purports to be Latin, 'On the Fox'. But it is certainly not classical Latin, where fox would be rendered (in the accusative) as 'vulpem' or 'volpem'. It is, rather, a back-formation via the Italian and might appropriately be translated as 'On Volpone'. So one of the 'plays' that have 'been writ' about the fox's / Cecil's 'successful thriving wit' might very well be *Volpone*. It seems all but certain. But as so often in satirical allusions of this kind there remains an element of doubt or uncertainty, which in these matters we ignore at our peril. An aim of this book is to reduce that 'element of doubt or uncertainty' to an absolute minimum. *Volpone*, I hope to demonstrate, is in important ways 'about' Robert Cecil, the most problematic of all Jonson's patrons. At the very least, Jonson was uncharacteristically thoughtless – even reckless – if he did not anticipate that his play of 'The Fox' would be associated with Cecil.

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John Creaser, in his fine edition of the play, considers how the quarto of *Volpone* might have struck a potential reader when it first went on sale:

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A browser at a London bookstall in 1607 who picked up the new quarto of a play called *Volpone, Or The Fox* would have been intrigued and perhaps even indignant to find eighteen pages of print – some of them in Latin, the language of learning – between the title and the opening speech. Plays were then printed as cheap, unbound quartos, as were trivia such as almanacs and joke-books, and Jonson's substantial preliminaries would have seemed either highly ambitious or highly pretentious.⁵

The extensive preliminaries of the volume are indeed of a piece with Jonson's habit in the early years of James's reign of freighting his texts with introductions, commendations and annotation. *Sejanus* in 1605, for example, had appeared with thirteen pages of address to the reader, commendatory verse and argument, besides the elaborate listing of historical sources throughout the margins of its text. All of this gave Jonson a reputation for tedious self-promotion and pedantry which lasts to this day. And this in turn has contributed to a general, but unfortunate, neglect of that extra-textual material.

In the case of *Volpone*, despite its popularity, only three of the many editions published in the last century have reproduced the preliminaries more or less as they appear in the quarto. Those of John D. Rea (1919) and Henry de Vocht (1937) were aimed at scholars rather than a general market; only the Revels edition of R. B. Parker (1983) has reached a wider readership.⁶ Most other editions have settled for reproducing what is essentially the 1616 folio version of the play, which retained the (slightly amended) opening Epistle but dispensed with the commendatory verse.⁷ As we have noted, the great Oxford editors, Herford and Simpson, set a seal on this, choosing the folio version as copy-text (as they usually did) and consigning the commendatory verse to the hidden by-ways of their multi-volume edition. Some recent student editions of the play, such as that in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, have even begun to dispense with the Epistle, while Robert N. Watson's *New Mermaids* text (2003) has relegated it to an appendix.

This is perhaps inevitable. *Volpone* is long and difficult enough as it is, and the preliminaries offer little to the average modern reader in the way of access to the text proper. The Epistle is only directly relevant to the play towards the end, where it attempts to justify the comedy's unusually harsh conclusion; two of the commendatory poems are in Latin, while the panegyric of the others (even if sometimes wittily expressed) does not chime with modern tastes. So I am swimming against a strong tide in suggesting that these preliminaries in fact deserve more attention than they have received and that (suitably contextualized) they offer very clear and particular access to the play-text proper.

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If we return to John Creaser's account we will notice that, although it invokes a hypothetical 1607 reader, he is characterized only as a casual bibliophile. Nothing is said about politics or religion, patronage or censorship, the forces dominating the world in which the play was forged and which shaped its text. Creaser's edition, of course, preceded the general 'return to history' which has characterized early modern literary studies for the last thirty years. But in fact *Volpone* itself has very largely passed under the radar of successive 'new historicisms'. *Bartholomew Fair* has engaged many concerned with economic history or matters of political authority; *Epicene* has engaged (and infuriated) many feminists. The long-neglected masques have been minutely scrutinized as products of courtly, and sometimes queenly, cultures. Several of the late plays have been rediscovered, and even staged. Jonson's texts, and especially the 1616 folio, have been central to the study of the history of the book.

But *Volpone* has been marginal to most of this scholarly attention, even as it has continued to be performed and studied in classrooms. In part this is surely because its beast fable format gives it a timeless self-containment: the play presents itself as an Aesopian tale of foxes and crows, vultures and flies, mountebanks and parrots, mordantly satirical, morally bracing. The Venetian setting, realized with all the loving attention to detail accorded to imperial Rome in *Sejanus*, further removes it from an obvious engagement with its own historical context.⁸ Perhaps for these reasons, Jonson's biographers have made little of his political (as distinct from professional or psychological) investment in this text. It is traditionally seen as a major turning-point in his career – the first of the great comedies, a significant advance in critical principle and practice from the 'comical satires', the first play for some time not to cause a scandal of one kind or another. But such accounts make little of the pressing biographical circumstances which generated this masterpiece. W. David Kay, for example, focuses on the play's 'creative assimilation' of both classical and contemporary precedents to produce 'a texture rich in irony and literary allusion'.⁹ David Riggs, to give another example, explains how in his biography he normally 'adopt[s] the outlook of a social historian . . . [and] my aims are to reconstruct [Jonson's] social and intellectual milieu; to describe the conditions within which he produced his plays, poems, and masques . . . When Jonson's behavior resists this kind of explanation, I seek out a psychological one.'¹⁰ In the case of *Volpone* he predominantly settles for the psychological approach, examining the springs of Jonson's apparent self-parody in the mountebank scene – 'the mountebank's self-portrait takes on a strikingly biographical dimension' (p. 137) – where 'Scoto of

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Mantua' reduces the idealized humanist aspirations of art (to which Jonson was always ostensibly committed) to the level of cheap commercial con-trickery. And of course this is both interesting and valuable. But it ducks the questions: why here, why now, why in this form?

What I argue here is that the full quarto text of *Volpone* answers all of these questions and many more besides. For prudential reasons it had to do so discreetly, and with what today we should call plausible deniability. Parts of what it had to say were undoubtedly more readily intelligible to a close coterie of Jonson's own circle, such as those who contributed the commendatory verses, than they would have been to the average reader envisaged by Creaser. Yet some less veiled elements of the text do gesture quite conspicuously towards what I would describe as its main concerns. These I take to be: broadly, the religio-political situation in the early years of James I's reign; specifically the Gunpowder Plot; and even more specifically the role in these of Robert Cecil, the Earl of Salisbury.¹¹ There is no mystery whatever about why these matters should have been of concern to Jonson.

When James I came to the throne in 1603, Jonson and other Roman Catholics had hopes (partly raised by James himself, while he waited for his succession to be secured) that he would relax the punitive laws against them, perhaps along the lines of the toleration extended to Protestant Huguenots in France by Henri IV in the 1598 Edict of Nantes.¹² So Jonson ceased taking the Anglican communion, which he was required by law to do. But it soon became apparent that formal toleration would not be forthcoming, something which helped spur the resolution of the Gunpowder Plotters. And in the wake of the Plot the recusancy laws and other, new, anti-Catholic provisions were enforced with some stringency.¹³ So in January 1606 Jonson and his wife, Anne, suffered their first arraignment before the Consistory Court of London for their failure to take the Anglican communion. As we shall also see, from details given within the text itself, this must have been exactly the time he was writing *Volpone*.

It is hardly surprising that all of this would deeply inform a play he wrote at lightning speed ('five weeks fully penned it', Plate 17, Prologue, line 16) in the wake of the Plot, while its aftermath continued to reverberate around him. Part of the joke of my second epigraph – '*The Gunpowder Plot*, there was a get-penny!' – is that no play of that title is known to have existed, though it might well have done a roaring trade if it had managed to get past the censors. For reasons we shall examine, the Plot itself was too sensitive a subject to deal with openly, even by

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those inclined to accept the government's view of what had happened (which, I shall argue, Jonson emphatically was not). But some plays at the time were certainly 'about' the Plot. Thomas Dekker's *The Whore of Babylon* (1607) is a good example. It actually depicts a string of the most notable attempts to assassinate Elizabeth I, but with the strong implication that the failed attempt on the life of James I is the latest evidence of a Protestant providence watching over England's rulers.¹⁴ Jonson's *Volpone*, I shall argue, is no less 'about' the Plot, but views it in a very different light.

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I have suggested that *Volpone* has somehow eluded most of the current efforts to relocate early modern literature in history (particularly political and religious history) and this is generally the case. But it is not quite true that no one else has noticed the Gunpowder Plot context of the play: James Tulip has written two brief articles on the issue, that have perhaps received less notice than they might for being published in Australia.¹⁵ I admire his demonstration that the whole mode of the play hinges on equivocation as a form of mental reservation, an issue associated with Jesuits in the wake of the Plot ('Comedy as Equivocation'), and endorse his observation that '*Volpone* needs to be seen as a complex, but ever so cautious, reflection on the state of England at the time of the Gunpowder Plot and Trial', a conclusion he reaches by locating the play in the Republic tradition of English humanist drama ('Contexts', p. 82). But I have difficulty with his contention 'that Sir Politic is a parody of Cecil himself' ('Comedy as Equivocation', p. 94), for reasons I shall address in Chapter 3. W. W. E. Slights's 'The Play of Conspiracies in *Volpone*' similarly demonstrates how much of the action and language of the play revolves around conspiracy and spying, which he properly locates in the cultural moment of the Gunpowder Plot but without enquiring further into the politics of Jonson's situation.¹⁶

I must also acknowledge a point made by the historian, Pauline Croft, who has done more than anyone in recent years to give proper weight to Cecil's historical standing:

In 1606 Salisbury was still giving Jonson occasional commissions, so the likelihood that the dramatist would deliberately offend his patron seems remote. However, Jonson's intentions and the public's reading of *Volpone* may well have varied. The frequent use of fox imagery in the posthumous libels [against Cecil] strengthen the view that the play was seen by the theatre-going populace as referring, however obliquely, to Salisbury.¹⁷

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That is, she finds it very plausible that *Volpone* was understood by contemporaries as aimed at Cecil, but difficult to believe that it was intentional on Jonson's part. As I have suggested, it would have been highly uncharacteristic of Jonson – a man who had contrived to antagonize a wide range of important people with his plays in less than ten years – to satirize the most powerful man in the country, after the king, *by accident*. But I also think (and hope to demonstrate) that what Jonson brings to this play, which he had signally failed to bring to some of his other recent works, is indeed plausible deniability.

That might not, in fact, have saved him if Cecil had chosen to prosecute the matter. But the fact is that, in 1606, Jonson and Cecil both needed one another – even if the need was significantly greater on Jonson's part than on Cecil's. Jonson wanted patronage and access to even more patronage at court, even if this meant employment by a man whom circumstances had given him small reason to respect (a situation which I suspect is reflected in the play's poisonous depiction of patron/client relations). Cecil wanted the skills of the one English writer of entertainments who had already established a track record of pleasing both King James and Queen Anna. Moreover Cecil had a track record of not deigning to respond to the great majority of personal abuse that he inevitably attracted. One of his biographers suggests that 'he refused to persecute those whose malice was only towards his own person'.¹⁸ And she elaborates on this with evidence from Cecil's own writing, an undated and unaddressed letter in the manuscripts at Hatfield House: 'He bore the hurtful and unending abuse with resignation, as one of the concomitants of "the place I own". When he considered "the nature of these railing speeches . . . I thank God I can very well contrive charity with forgiveness". Men were never hounded down for railing against the Secretary, abuse of himself was not recorded "in evil ink"' (p. 231). There were – or, at least, people feared there might be – limits to that forbearance, as we shall see. But in 1606 it was in the interests of Jonson to be careful and of Cecil to maintain his usual 'charity' and not to enquire too closely.

What is different about my own book, and what chiefly differentiates it from my own earlier efforts to say something about these contexts of *Volpone*, is the contention that the 1607 quarto text of the play – the book as a coherent entity – is designed to steer a certain readership towards these contextual readings. This makes that quarto, I think, unique in its era. And it sets limits to the range of what we may constructively identify as 'allusions', an issue which has long bedevilled the localized reading of early modern drama. Barbara de Luna – whose pioneering work on

Jonson's *Catiline* I shall return to more than once – aptly said that ‘the dramatists writing in the age of Elizabeth and James were a sly lot, and they were writing for a sly lot’.¹⁹ Given the censorship which constrained them, and which was supposed to prevent the confrontations with authority to which Jonson in particular was all too prone, this is not surprising.²⁰ It gave rise to all kinds of subtle encodings and complex (often allegorical or analogical) reading practices, to which only a small minority would have been privy at the time, and which are usually pretty opaque to readers today. But this has given scope for any number of speculative, not to say fantastical, modern readings of early modern plays. Josephine W. Bennett put it well in 1942 when she observed: ‘Modern attempts to discover and interpret Elizabethan allegory have produced such absurdities at the hands of over-zealous devotees that a scholar who desires a reputation for sanity hardly ventures to touch the subject.’²¹ I am hoping that my focus on Jonson's ambitious 1607 quarto will keep my speculations in bounds, indeed impose a discipline on them, and preserve what reputation for sanity I may still possess.

As Jonson himself protests in the Epistle to *Volpone*: ‘nothing can be so innocently writ or carried but may be made obnoxious to construction’ (Plate 5, lines 76–8) – liable to (mis)interpretation. But this is, and Jonson knows it is, a two-edged sword. The fact that the reader can make of a text something that the author (says he) never intended is at once a useful cover-all defence and an attractive lure to readers to seek for precisely the double meanings which are ostensibly being denied. It seems clear that all early modern dramatists knew of, and exploited, this doubleness, and none more so than Jonson. It is hardly surprising therefore that modern attempts to decode what early readers might have found in these texts is always going to be more an art than a science. In this instance, however, I argue that, for all his protestations, Jonson produced a text in which so many elements all point in the same direction (the sub-texts of the Epistle, the associations and implications of the commendatory verses, the genre of the piece, detailed clues on timing within the play itself, and certain key motifs with the play's plotting and imagery) that we may decode something of the play's significance to its original readers with an unusual degree of certainty.

That said, this is also the place to acknowledge that there has been one other major attempt to associate a Jonson play with his involvement in the Gunpowder Plot, Barbara de Luna's *Jonson's Romish Plot* (1967), which argues at length and in detail that he composed ‘a self-justifying parallelogram on the Powder Plot, wrapped up in the trappings of