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Module No 09: Ben Jonson: *Volpone*

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Section 1: Introduction

This module examines the work of Ben Jonson, one of the most prominent playwrights of the Jacobean period, second only to Shakespeare in popularity and repute. The module offers a detailed analysis of his play *Volpone* as a case study of the kind of drama Jonson was best known for, the comedy of humours. The first section offers a biographical and historical background to the work of Jonson, tracing his evolution as a writer who appealed to both the masses and the classes. The second section offers a detailed summary and a structural analysis of the plot of *Volpone*. The third section outlines the major characteristics and purpose of the comedy of humours and examines characterization in *Volpone* in the light of these dramatic features. The fourth section examines the major themes in the play, namely, avarice, appearances, deception and knowledge. The fifth section studies aspects of social commentary in *Volpone*. The sixth and final section offers a survey of the critical reception of Jonson's work.

Benjamin Jonson was born on June 11, 1572 into a minister's family. His father died shortly before his birth and he was raised by his mother and stepfather, who was a bricklayer. Jonson attended St. Martin's parish school and Westminster school, where he received the tutelage of the classical historian and scholar William Camden. After leaving school in 1589, Jonson worked briefly as his stepfather's apprentice and then joined the English armed forces in Flanders. Upon returning to London, Jonson started working as a professional actor and playwright for Philip Henslowe's theatre company. Little is known about these early years of his career, except that he played a part in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and wrote a few tragedies of his own. Jonson also had a penchant for getting into trouble: he was imprisoned in 1597 on charges of sedition for co-authoring (with Thomas Nashe) the satirical play *The Isle of Dogs* and the following year he was tried for the murder of a fellow actor, Gabriel Spencer in a duel. Jonson narrowly escaped the death penalty by pleading benefit of clergy. He was, however, branded a felon and sent to prison, where he converted to Roman Catholicism. He would reconvert to the Anglican Church in 1610. Jonson tasted literary success in 1598 with the production of his play *Every Man in His Humour* at the Globe by the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The play was based on the classical model of comedy, with character types like a passionate lover, a rigid father and a clever servant. It brought into vogue the comedy of humours – based on the theory of distinct personality types dependant on the predominance of various body fluids – and turned Jonson into an overnight celebrity. The following year, Jonson tried to follow up the

success of this play with the rather pedantic and voluminous *Every Man Out of His Humour* but it failed to attract the audience to the playhouses. He continued writing plays like *Cynthia's Revels* (1600) and *The Poetaster* (1601), in which his contempt for human folly as well as his desire for order and decorum were evident. These plays also satirized Jonson's contemporaries, John Marston and Thomas Dekker, and set off what is popularly known as the War of the Theatres.

With the accession of King James I to the throne of England in 1603, Jonson's fortunes turned as he found favour with the royal audience as a successful writer of courtly masques, a form of spectacular dramatic performance involving elaborate sets, costumes, music and songs. Some of the most successful masques he wrote during this period were *The Satyr* (1603) and *The Masque of Blackness* (1605). Jonson also continued writing plays for the public stage, including some of his most famous plays like *Volpone, or The Fox* (1606), *Epicoene: or, The Silent Woman* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610) and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). In these plays, Jonson presented a satirical picture of human nature in the context of the rise of the mercantile class in Jacobean England. He was granted an annual pension by the royal court in 1616 and is therefore considered to be the first Poet Laureate of England. He also brought out a folio edition of his collected works in the same year, which reflects his own sense of his stature as an author of substantial talent and repute. He was also awarded an honorary Master of Arts degree by Oxford University in 1619. Jonson's career went downhill in the 1620s as the plays he wrote in this decade were comparatively less successful than his previous work. His public repute, however, withstood commercial failures like *The Staple of News* (1625), *The New Inn* (1629) and *A Tale of a Tub* (1633); in fact, a group of young poets, which included Sir John Suckling, Robert Herrick, Thomas Carew and Richard Lovelace, were greatly influenced by Jonson's style of writing and called themselves 'sons' or 'tribe' of Ben. Though Jonson was known primarily as a playwright, he also wrote epigrams, occasional poems and essays through his career. He is especially well known for his tribute to Shakespeare, whom he considered to be a less skilled artist than himself. Jonson died in 1637 and was buried at Westminster Abbey.

Section 2: Plot Synopsis

Volpone is set in seventeenth century Venice and the action of the play unfolds in the course of a single day. As Jonson himself informs us in the Prologue, the play adheres to the

classical unities of time, place and action. In the opening scene, we are introduced to two of the main characters in the play, Volpone and his servant Mosca, who are busy hatching a plot to dupe three legacy hunters, Voltore (a lawyer), Corbaccio (a miserly old gentleman) and Corvino (a rich merchant), who have arrived with lavish gifts for Volpone in the hope of winning his favour and inheriting his fortune. In what is veritably a parade of fools, these men make their appearances one after the other, only to be subjected to Mosca's biting satire once they are gone. Volpone himself is an avaricious con man and pretends, with the aid of his cunning servant, to be on his deathbed in order to fleece these gulls. Mosca even convinces Corbaccio to disinherit his own son Bonario by luring him with the prospect of becoming Volpone's heir. Mosca also describes the beauty of Corvino's wife Celia in glowing terms to Volpone, which makes him very curious and becomes the germ of another plot complication. In the second act, we see Volpone disguised as an Italian mountebank, "Scoto of Mantua" and expertly peddling his new oil that is supposedly a cure for all maladies. Just as Celia drops her handkerchief from her window to make a transaction with him, Corvino arrives on the scene and drives "Scoto" away in a fit of jealous rage. He suspects Celia of being unfaithful and threatens to put her under house arrest; meanwhile, Volpone returns to his house and complains to Mosca of being sick with lust for Celia. Mosca promises Volpone to deliver Celia to him and to this effect, he goes to Corvino and convinces him that if he lets his wife sleep with Volpone as a restorative for his ill health, Volpone will make him his heir in return.

In the third act, Mosca informs Bonario that Corbaccio intends to disinherit him and takes him back to Volpone's house to witness his father signing off his fortune to Volpone. Mosca hopes that upon seeing this, Bonario would kill his father in a fit of rage and Volpone would thus gain immediate possession of his fortune. In the meantime, Lady Politic, the wife of a ridiculously naïve English knight Sir Politic Would-Be, also arrives at Volpone's residence and drives him to desperation with her talkativeness. Mosca diverts her by telling her that he has spotted her husband with a courtesan on a gondola. In the meantime, Corvino brings Celia to Volpone's house, ignoring her protests and commanding her to do her duty. When Volpone is finally alone with Celia, he jumps out of his bed and tries to seduce her; when she resists his advances, he tries to rape her. She is saved just in time by Bonario, who has been hiding in the room in anticipation of his father's arrival. Mosca contrives a story to save his master from being arrested: he convinces Corbaccio that his son is out to kill him and Corvino to testify in court that

Celia is a lewd woman. Together, they accuse Bonario of having forced Celia to falsely accuse Volpone of attempted rape and the two of them of being lovers. At the beginning of the fourth act, Lady Politic confronts her husband and his fellow Englishman, Peregrine, whom she mistakes for a courtesan in disguise. When she realizes her mistake, she apologizes to Peregrine but he takes offense and swears to avenge himself for the insult. In the meantime, Bonario and Celia's appeal against Volpone is dismissed by the court in the face of the false accusation brought against them. Mosca also convinces Lady Politic that the courtesan her husband was spotted with is indeed Celia. Volpone appears in the court on a stretcher, thereby proving his infirmity to defend himself against the charges. Though he is acquitted by the court, Volpone wants to pull off one final trick in the final act: he asks Mosca to proclaim that his master is dead so that the fortune hunters assemble in the hope of claiming his fortune, only to discover that Mosca has been nominated as the heir. The three men are enraged and bring the matter to the court, accusing Mosca of contriving the whole plot to trick them. Mosca intends to carry on with the story of Volpone's death so that he gets to enjoy his fortune but Volpone reveals the truth to thwart his plan. In the end, the judges send Mosca to the gallows, confiscate Volpone's property and sentence him to be confined to a hospital for incurables. Voltore is debarred, Corvino is separated from his wife and Corbaccio is deprived of his fortune. Celia is sent back to her father's house with her dowry trebled and Bonario is given possession of his father's fortune.

The plot of *Volpone* is constructed as a series of intrigues, one leading to the next, from the beginning to the end. The action is thus driven ahead by means of dramatic irony, which not only generates situational comedy but also encourages the audience to view the characters critically in the light of the knowledge they have of what is happening on stage. Thus, for example, while the tricks played by Peregrine and Mosca on Sir and Lady Politic Would-Be lead to hilarious situations, they also expose the pitfalls of the vanity and affectation that these characters suffer from. Such developments in the sub-plot mimic the action in the main plot, which is also essentially about the duping of flawed characters by means of exploiting their weaknesses and ignorance. Significantly, the final tricks played by Mosca and Volpone, who have been the puppeteers controlling most of the characters throughout the play, turn against them in an instance of ironic reversal of the power and knowledge they have been misusing. The circumscription of all their intrigues by the limited space and time in which the events of the day unfold is a form of dramatic compression of action and character that suggests the excessive

indulgence in the pursuit of pleasure that must find its logical and moral resolution in the way the play concludes. Thus, the dramatic structure of the play is intended, as Jonson states at the outset, to amuse as well as instruct the audience.

Section 3: Characterization

Jonson's characters reflect his theory of the 'comedy of humours' that has its roots in the classical comedies of Plautus and Terence in which characters are portrayed and identified as 'types' through distinct, predominant traits of speech, thought or action. The term 'humour' originated from ancient Greek and Roman medicine and philosophy and signified the four major bodily fluids – blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile – which were believed to correspond to the four elements (air, water, fire, earth) and determine the personality type and the physical and mental well being of an individual. The predominance of any one of these fluids was supposed to have led to an imbalance and consequently to the emergence of peculiar character traits in an individual: thus, an excess of blood made a person 'sanguine' (brave, cheerful, carefree), yellow bile 'choleric' (irritable, angry), black bile 'melancholic' (depressed, mournful) and phlegm 'phlegmatic' (calm, contemplative). In Jonson's own words,

When some one peculiar quality

Doth so possess a man that it doth draw

All his effects, his spirits, and his powers,

In their confluents, all to run one way;

This may truly be said to be a humour.

("Prologue", *Every Man Out of His Humour*)

According to Jonson, a 'humour' was more than merely an amusing eccentricity of speech or behaviour: it was a more permanent, inherent characteristic of an individual thought and conduct that coloured his responses to specific situations and his general outlook to life. In *Volpone*, each of the main characters is portrayed as being guided by a predominant trait that is symbolically suggested through his name: thus, Volpone is cunning and capricious like a fox in everything he says and does, Mosca is parasitic like a fly that leeches off the very source of his sustenance, the three fortune hunters Voltore, Corvino and Corbaccio are (respectively) like a vulture, a crow and a raven, all birds of prey. The fact that Jonson chooses to liken these characters to animals fairly

common in beast fables suggests that their actions are meant to be allegorical. The greed and unscrupulous ambition that drives each of these characters may be considered to be indicative of the general atmosphere of early seventeenth century London, where mammon-worship and fortune hunting were the rule of the day.

The titular character, Volpone represents the excesses that Jonson perceived as characterizing the London society of his times. Volpone is a devious man who loves indulging in sensual pleasures but hates the idea of working hard to earn his livelihood. His fondness for intrigue and his polished censure of those who seek to inherit his fortune seem to reflect Jonson's own dramatic approach to the vices of his society; yet, for all the critical potential of his satirical attitude to the legacy hunters, Volpone himself is something of a voyeur, delighting in witnessing the spectacle of unrestrained greed and ambitiousness that infects his own personality too. In fact, the darker aspects of his hedonistic personality become evident when he tries to rape Celia, and when he finally falls prey to his own trick at the hands of his clever servant. Like the proverbial fox, Volpone's cunning ultimately becomes his own undoing. Mosca is undoubtedly the force that drives the plot forward, as it is he who comes up with the various stratagems and schemes that Volpone so greatly enjoys participating in. Determined and remorseless in his pursuit of money, Mosca is in some ways a perfect embodiment of the avarice and deceit that seem to be endemic to the society he inhabits. Though he appears to be obsequious and faithful towards his master at the beginning, he finally turns out to be just as conniving and opportunistic as anyone else in the play. The fortune hunters are all characterized satirically: Voltore's fondness for legal tricks backfires on him, Corbaccio's physical decrepitude reflects his moral malaise and makes his hope of outliving Volpone ridiculous, Corvino's overprotective jealousy concerning his wife is revealed as shockingly hypocritical in the light of his willingness to trade her off for money. The desire for upward social mobility is also represented in a comical light through minor characters like Sir and Lady Politic Would-Be, the former absurd in his misplaced faith in his own social skills and competence, the latter annoying in her attempt to talk her way into Volpone's favour. In contrast to these characters, Bonario and Celia seem almost unbelievably good natured and idealistic. In fact, they function as foils to the self-serving, greedy individuals they are surrounded by and have a rather naïve and sentimental outlook to things in a world where such a romantic approach to human nature seems quite out of place. Yet, at the end,

they are the only characters who go unpunished and represent righteousness and self-restraint in a general atmosphere of corruption and immorality.

Section 4: Themes

One of the most important themes in *Volpone* is avarice, which refers to greed that extends not only to money and material possessions but also to power and status. From the very beginning of the play, we observe that each character seeks to attain the objects of his desire without any consideration of the consequences of such a pursuit to himself or others. Thus, in spite of being a nobleman, Volpone himself attempts to dupe the three legacy hunters and revels in being able to outwit them in a stratagem that is driven by the greed for money. The absurd levels to which Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore are willing to debase themselves in their misplaced hope of inheriting Volpone's fortune reveals the risks to which one stands exposed if he chooses to blindly follow material desires without applying reason or good sense to such an enterprise. In a comedic parallel to the main plot, the sub-plot involving Sir and Lady Politic Would-Be also becomes a dramatic device for representing the pitfalls of uncritical ambition and greed. Thus, while Lady Politic is ridiculous and pathetic in her attempt to ingratiate herself with Volpone, going even to the extent of offering sexual favours in the hope of inheriting his property, her husband's pretensions to social grace are hilarious in the way they cause him to fall prey to Peregrine's trick. While Volpone and Mosca offer brilliantly satirical commentary on the gullibility of such foolish characters, they are themselves also driven by the same forceful greed that they mock in their victims. Volpone's reckless indulgence in sensual pleasures – food, wealth, entertainment, sex – remains comical to the extent that it propels the dramatic action through a series of amusing situations and exposes the follies in the characters that surround him. But when he pursues his sensual instincts to the point of committing sexual violence on Celia, the situation no longer remains merely comical but turns dangerous as the ugly face of avarice is exposed. Similarly, when Mosca decides to double-cross Volpone in order to gain custody over half of his property, priding himself on his cunning and using intrigue as a means of self-promotion just like his master, it is greed that fuels his actions and ultimately becomes both their undoing. Volpone's own words, "What a rare punishment/Is avarice to itself", ultimately turn into an ironic comment on his own actions in the final dramatic reversal of his fortunes.

Closely aligned with the theme of avarice are the themes of disguise, ignorance, appearance and reality. The action of the play unfolds through a series of intrigues based on disguises, which are mostly orchestrated by Volpone and Mosca to get the better off their dupes. Thus, the primary ploy through which the characters are brought together is Volpone's disguise of being a rich man on his deathbed. This in turn motivates the fortune hunters to feign loyalty and generosity towards Volpone and exposes them to financial ruin. The dramatic tension is built here by setting up an opposition between two sets of characters, both pretending to be what they are not and using deception as a means of satisfying their greed. While Volpone's disguise as a mountebank functions as a highly entertaining episode in his successful deception of Celia, things turn threatening when he gives up his disguise of being old and ailing and tries to force himself upon her. The tension between appearance and reality also manifests itself in more serious ways when Bonario and Celia, the only two truly virtuous characters in the play, are very easily charged with promiscuity and murderous intent through the machinations of Mosca. The underlying theme of the miscarriage of justice is one that emerges as a potentially tragic outcome of the comical game of disguise and deception that Volpone and Mosca have been playing. In fact, abstract notions like honour, conscience and chastity, which Celia invokes in her pleas to Volpone, seem to have very little currency in a social context where even the gatekeepers of law and justice seem to be just as gullible and susceptible to false appearances as the subjects whose interests they are in charge of safeguarding. The ignorance and lack of self-knowledge that in minor characters like Sir Politic Would-Be is simply a comical character trait becomes potentially threatening and ultimately self-destructive in characters like Volpone and Mosca as both carry their game too far in their proud self-confidence in their own wits and their relentless pursuit of material goals. In an instance of poetic justice, the very force that ensured the duo's success throughout the play – their combined intelligence and greed – also pulls them apart and becomes the final cause of their ruin. The play implicitly examines the lack of trust and loyalty in inter-personal relationships in a social context where the only means and index of success and happiness seems to be the self-serving achievement of material pleasure. Thus, be it Corvino's wild insecurity about his wife's faithfulness or Lady Politic Would-Be's ridiculous doubts about her husband's, Corbaccio's willingness to disinherit his son or Corvino's to sell Celia's body for his own profit, Mosca's double-crossing ways of climbing up the social ladder or Volpone's relentless exploitation of other people's weaknesses and ignorance, the play presents

the picture of a society where everyone seems to be motivated by a selfish desire for personal gain.

Section 5: Social Commentary

Unlike his contemporary William Shakespeare, Jonson's formal training in classical literature was reflected in the way he conceived of comic drama. Like the ancient Greek and Roman playwrights he drew inspiration from, Jonson's comedies were meant to both entertain and instruct. He used drama as an instrument of social satire: thus, he not only ridiculed the vices of ordinary men and women but also sent out a strong and clear moral message to his audience. *Volpone* is a case in point. Though the play is set in Venice, the characters and action are clearly applicable to the general social context of seventeenth century London. The materialistic tendencies that are shown as infecting practically all the characters in the play are to be understood not as signs of individual moral weakness but as a direct consequence of the socio-economic conditions prevalent in the England of Jonson's own times. The rise of the mercantile classes in England during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods effected a rapid influx of people engaged in different professions into London society. No longer was it necessary for a person to be born well to acquire wealth and status, as the booming English trade and commerce opened up avenues of social betterment for a wide range of working class professionals like lawyers, doctors, merchants and businessmen. Contemporary playwrights often represented such characters in stereotypical terms as a means of finding a dramatic outlet for the cultural anxiety resulting from the rapid changes in the social structure. In the hands of masters like Marlowe and Shakespeare, however, characters like Barabas (*The Jew of Malta*) and Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*) received sufficiently complex detailing to resist simplistic categorization as hero or villain. It is in this historical and theatrical context that Jonson's play ought to be read as a document of social criticism.

The setting of the play itself is significant, as Venice was a major hub of economic activity in seventeenth century Europe and was popularly believed in England to be the den of sin and decadence. It is only appropriate that in such a symbolic setting, Jonson's characters should also stand for beastly vices like greed, vanity, lust and pride. *Volpone's* hedonistic delight in sensual pleasures is matched by the fortune hunters' unrestrained greed for money. The only

way in which Volpone is set apart from his victims is his ability to use his superior intelligence to trick them into believing that they have the upper hand over him in the game of deceit both are playing. Thus, there is no real moral distinction between the 'hero' and the 'villains' in this case: the crucial difference between the two is merely that the former is more manipulative and imaginative than the latter. In fact, when Volpone tries to rape Celia, his act no longer remains a harmless trick played on a dupe but becomes an overt sign of the moral degradation his character has undergone in the reckless pursuit of pleasure and wealth. For all his clever wit and carefree pursuit of intrigue, Volpone, much like the proverbial fox, ultimately falls into the elaborate trap that he had laid for others. It is interesting to note that Volpone's nemesis turns out to be his own faithful servant, Mosca who outsmarts his master at his own game of lies and deception. While the intelligent, double-crossing servant is a fairly common character type in comedies of the period, Mosca also represents the lust for money and status that percolated down the social ranks. The fact that Volpone and Mosca ultimately betray one another fulfils the dramatic logic of their own game of intrigue and brings about their downfall. The final punishment that both master and servant receive, along with the fortune hunters, brings them all together within the same moral compass and seems to indicate Jonson's moral vision of a society where avarice and vanity must be exposed and corrected. Jonson also follows the popular comedic convention of rewarding the virtuous characters, Bonario and Celia, at the end of the play. Though both of them make significant economic gains at the end, it is not through their own pursuit of wealth. In Jonson's moral scheme, only those who act honourably and without selfish motives of personal gain deserve to go unpunished. Yet, their deliverance from the very real threat of a wrong judicial sentence is just as miraculous as their virtuous actions are exceptional in the corrupt society they live in. Unlike Shakespeare's romantic comedies, the play ends not with the promise of personal fulfilment but with only the redistribution of wealth among the characters in terms of their moral virtue and vice. Thus, Jonson's characters remain circumscribed within the social codes that he subjects to criticism and ultimately represent a rather grim moral vision of a world in which goodness and evil are in a state of precarious conflict.

Section 6: Critical Overview

Since its first performance in 1606, *Volpone* has remained one of the most famous plays in the oeuvre of Jonson. His comedy of humours was particularly influential during the Restoration, when playwrights like Congreve, Etherege and Wycherley were writing a kind of comedy that was directed at the faults and foibles of urban, upper class characters based in London. Popularly known as the comedy of manners, such plays satirized, much like Jonson's comedies, the peculiar personality traits of stock characters that made them act in ridiculous and often quite immoral ways. Jonson's theory of distinct predispositions or 'humours' was adapted by the Restoration playwrights to mock rather than correct the social maladies that afflicted their characters. However, William Congreve, one of the most prominent writers of this kind of comedy, finds Jonson's characters lacking in the sophistication of speech and the passion of feeling that he observes in the work of his own contemporaries. Early 18th century critics of drama largely focussed on a comparative analysis of the merits of Jonson and Shakespeare. Thus, Nicholas Rowe suggests that though Jonson was a more learned man and a better scholar than Shakespeare, the latter had a natural gift of imagination far greater than any amount of careful study could attain. Others like John Dennis have praised Jonson's dramatic craft for its capacity to expose the ridiculousness of human behaviour through as well as in the major characters of his plays. Writers like Alexander Pope observed that Jonson was the first playwright to bring critical learning in vogue on the English stage, guiding his audience, albeit with some artifice through prologues and declamations, on how to respond to characters and situations. While he recognized Jonson's adherence to the classical rules of dramatic composition, especially in the domain of comedy, Pope also warned against the adversarial overstatement of Jonson's reliance on studious craft and Shakespeare's free exercise of imagination which earlier critics had been guilty of. While the classical nature of Jonson's writing predictably did not find favour with Romantic critics and audiences, in the twentieth century there has been a popular and academic resurgence of interest in his work, especially in the specific literary and social context in which he wrote. Thus, contemporary critics like Rosalind Miles have pointed out that Jonson attempted to create an "ideal audience", one that would "share his standards and accept his assessments", while others like A.D. Cousin point to his inevitable dependence on the very men and women whose character he sought to create and improve. Richard Dutton, on the other hand, has critically examined the complex relationship between *Volpone* and *Mosca* in the light of the rules of

patronage in seventeenth century England, detecting contrary impulses of loyalty and resentment in their equation. Similarly, James Loxley comments on the breakdown of personal and familial relations as well as of public institutions of law and morality in *Volpone* under the strain of desire in a mercantile culture that is both enacted as well as contained in the specific theatrical context of Jacobean England.

Storyboard

Section 1: Introduction

- Jonson's early life and education
- His successful career as a dramatist
- His achievements and legacy as a major author of his times

Section 2: Plot Synopsis

- Volpone's central intrigue involving the duping of the three fortune hunters
- Mosca's role in bringing the action to a point of crisis
- The final resolution resulting in the punishment of vice
- Significance of the dramatic structure

Section 3: Characterization

- The literary lineage and features of the comedy of humours
- The satirical portrayal of characters as overruled by greed for money and pleasure
- Representation of the virtuous characters as exceptional foils to the vicious

Section 4: Themes

- Avarice as the central theme running through the action and characterization
- The themes of appearances and disguise explored through the various plot intrigues
- Implicit critique of the breakdown of personal relations in a materialistic society

Section 5: Social Commentary

- The socio-economic context of the rise of mercantile classes in 17th century England
- Pursuit of material pleasure as endemic to the society Jonson portrays
- The resolution of the play's action as representing Jonson's moral vision of society

Section 6: Critical Overview

- Influence of Jonson's comedy on humours on the Restoration comedy of manners
- Comparative criticism between Jonson and Shakespeare in the early 18th century
- Modern critics' views on Jonson's portrayal of family, class, law and society

Points to Ponder

- Jonson's influence on the Restoration comedy of manners
- Class relations in *Volpone* as a reflection of early 17th century social and economic structures in England
- Gender roles and family relations in *Volpone*

Do You Know

- In Jonson's first successful play, *Every Man in His Humour*, Shakespeare played a part.
- Jonson claimed to have written the entire text of *Volpone* in just five weeks.
- The first stage performance of *Volpone* was put up by the King's Men, the same group which enacted many of Shakespeare's plays too.
- In response to the popular legend that Shakespeare never blotted a line while he wrote, Jonson said, "Would he had blotted a thousand".