



Greed in sixteenth-century British society: a critical reading of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*

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Abstract

Ben Jonson is renowned for his parody of the social vices that characterised the Elizabethan and early Jacobean period. This article examines the vice of avarice, a coforce that had come to dominate the consciousness of the emerging wealthy class. *Volpone*, or *The Fox* offers a sharp critique of a society increasingly governed by deception, material excess, and moral bankruptcy. Greed functions as a unifying and pervasive trait across the play, motivating both the deceiver and the deceived, and collapsing conventional distinctions between virtues and vice. Religious discourse of the period consistently condemned greed as one of the deadly sins; however, lived social practices reveal a striking disjunction between moral doctrine and everyday conduct. Jonson exposes this hypocrisy by presenting a world in which ethical values are subordinated to the pursuit of wealth. Through satire, exaggeration, and animal imagery, the play reveals how avarice distorts human relationships, corrodes legal and social institutions, and ultimately renders moral reform impossible within a corrupt social order.

Keywords: Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, avarice, greed, satire, social vices, Elizabethan and Jacobean society, moral hypocrisy

Introduction

Greed occupied a paradoxical position in British society during the sixteenth century. While it was repeatedly condemned as a moral vice in religious, philosophical, and literary discourse, it simultaneously operated as a driving force behind economic expansion, political ambition, and social mobility. The tensions generated by this contradiction find a sharp and satirical expression in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606), a play that, though written at the turn of the seventeenth century, powerfully reflects the ethical anxieties and social realities inherited from the late sixteenth century. Through its relentless exposure of avarice, *Volpone* offers a critique of a society increasingly organised around wealth, deception, and self-interest. Greed in sixteenth-century British society functioned as both a condemned moral vice and a socially productive force. Economic transition, religious reform, and political centralisation created conditions in which the pursuit of wealth increasingly shaped social relations, even as it was denounced in sermons and moral tracts. Through satire, Jonson reveals how avarice infiltrates law, marriage, friendship, and morality itself.

The economic transformations of the sixteenth century laid fertile ground for the culture of greed depicted in *Volpone*. The decline of feudal structures, the rise of market economies, and the expansion of trade encouraged the pursuit of wealth as a marker of success and power. Traditional moral frameworks that emphasised moderation and communal responsibility struggled to contain these changes. In *Volpone*, greed is not limited to one character but infects an entire social network. Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, each representing different social positions—lawyer, gentleman, and merchant—are united by their obsessive desire to inherit *Volpone*'s wealth. Jonson thus mirrors a society in which greed cuts across class boundaries and becomes a shared social pathology rather than an individual aberration.

Religious discourse in sixteenth-century Britain consistently denounced greed as a deadly sin, associating it with spiritual decay and divine punishment. However, the period's

religious upheavals, particularly the Reformation, exposed a gap between doctrine and practice. The dissolution of monasteries and the redistribution of church wealth revealed how moral rhetoric could mask material ambition. This hypocrisy resonates strongly in *Volpone*, where outward performances of loyalty, virtue, and concern conceal ruthless self-interest. The legacy-hunters cloak their greed in gestures of devotion, much as sixteenth-century elites often justified material accumulation through religious or moral language. Jonson's satire thus exposes the hollowness of ethical claims in a society dominated by acquisitive desire.

Urbanisation and the growth of mercantile culture further intensified anxieties about greed. Cities became spaces of opportunity, competition, and moral risk, where wealth could be rapidly gained or lost. *Volpone* is set in Venice, a commercial hub symbolic of global trade and financial excess, but its moral landscape would have been readily recognisable to a British audience shaped by London's expansion in the late sixteenth century. *Volpone* himself embodies the new figure of wealth unmoored from traditional obligations. His pleasure lies not merely in possessing gold but in manipulating others' greed. This portrayal suggests that greed is self-perpetuating: it generates deception, exploitation, and moral emptiness, infecting both the deceiver and the deceived.

Jonson believed that the purpose of literature is to bring morality and reform. He was pained by the moral decay of his times and ventured to play the moral duty of bringing these vices to light. Through his characters, he highlights the moral bankruptcy plaguing the era. And attempts to bring some moral order through the actions. *Volpone*, as a symbol exquisitely reflects a composition of the vices prevalent in contemporary society. Jonson brought the rough Elizabethan society to the theatres. The relationship between Shakespeare and Jonson was of bitter rivals or not but the fact remains that both had come from not so elite backgrounds—Shakespeare from a rural background, and Jonson from an urban Centre like London. His exposure to cities like Westminster brought him to the theater circles.

This research paper attempts to analyse the mercantile consumerist society of Jonson's time. Elements of avarice will be explored in Ben Jonson's play, *Volpone or the Fox*. As during the 16th century European countries were venturing in search of the New World, the flow of the wealth went from West to East, as India was the commercial supplier of spices, expensive textiles and other luxurious goods. Meanwhile, the west paid in the form of gold. The high society of Europe profited a sense of pleasure from such luxuries. This was the time of proliferation of mercantile consumerist society where pleasure was derived from the acquisition of luxury goods.

Analysis of Avarice in *Volpone*

Volpone is set in the jewel like, Italian Renaissance city of Venice. Riches and wealth form the central stage from the opening Tableau which says:

"Good morning to the day; and next my gold:
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint"

Life, for *Volpone*, the character of the play, holds the same value as luxury and wealth. Certain inspiration for these lines has been taken from the intrinsic nature of flourishing consumerist society where material goods dictate the social status of the person. Social class hierarchy of Medieval England consisted of three classes: monarchs, clergy and knights who formed noble classes. In the middle were merchants, doctors and lower clergy. In the lowest rung existed the peasant class? Upper class' obsession with material wealth has been satirised through the means of this play. The plot of this play grew out of the beast fable which was popularised by the oral tradition of Elizabethan England. *Volpone* means fox in Italian, and *Mosca* is a word for parasitic gadfly. The characters derive their names from animals and birds, and hold the characteristics which are dominant in certain creatures.

Volpone is a rich Venetian nobleman who feigns a fatal illness while promising his greedy friends that he will make them an heir to his wealth. *Volpone's* genius lies in his skills of deceiving the covetous wealthy people, the greedy rich folks without resorting to trade, venture or product but merely through commercial advancements. Greed in *Volpone* also reflects the political culture of patronage prevalent in sixteenth-century Britain. Court life under the Tudors encouraged ambition, competition, and strategic self-advancement. Success depended less on merit than on proximity to power and the ability to exploit opportunities. The legacy-hunters' performances before *Volpone* resemble courtiers vying for royal favour, exposing how greed becomes embedded in systems of power rather than existing as a private vice. Jonson's critique aligns with contemporary concerns that unchecked ambition and materialism threatened social and political stability.

Importantly, *Volpone* does not present greed as an accidental moral failing but as a structural condition of society. Nearly every character is compromised, and even the apparent restoration of justice at the play's end carries an uneasy tone. This aligns with late sixteenth-century moral discourse, which increasingly recognised that greed was sustained by economic systems, legal practices, and social aspirations. The play's harsh satire suggests a society where moral ideals persist largely as rhetoric, overwhelmed by the practical rewards of deception and accumulation.

At the centre of the play stands *Volpone*, whose opening soliloquy establishes greed as a form of devotion? Addressing his gold, he declares:

"Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint." (Act I, Scene i)

Here, wealth is explicitly equated with divinity. *Volpone's* language parodies religious worship, suggesting that gold has replaced God as the true object of reverence. This reflects post-Reformation Britain, where the collapse of monastic charity and the redistribution of church wealth blurred the line between spiritual authority and material gain. Jonson's satire implies that greed has become a new faith, one that commands ritual, loyalty, and sacrifice.

The legacy-hunters—*Voltore*, *Corbaccio*, and *Corvino*—demonstrate how greed transcends class boundaries. Each character represents a professional identity traditionally associated with ethical responsibility: the lawyer, the patriarch, and the merchant. Yet all abandon moral restraint in pursuit of *Volpone's* inheritance. *Voltore's* hypocrisy is evident when he proclaims:

"You have made me happy, i' my poor suit against him."
(Act II, Scene i)

As a lawyer, *Voltore* should embody justice, yet his language reduces legal integrity to personal gain. Jonson critiques a legal culture increasingly shaped by patronage and profit, mirroring contemporary fears in sixteenth-century England that law had become a commodity rather than a moral institution.

Corbaccio's greed reaches grotesque extremes when he disinherits his own son to secure *Volpone's* favour:

"I do here renounce him;
Cut him off, as a stranger to my blood." (Act I, Scene iv)

This moment reveals greed as fundamentally anti-social. Familial bonds, traditionally sacred in early modern moral thought, are sacrificed to material desire. Jonson suggests that greed dissolves the very foundations of social order, a concern widely expressed in sixteenth-century moral literature responding to enclosure, displacement, and economic inequality.

Corvino's avarice is most disturbing in its gendered expression. He offers his wife, *Celia*, to *Volpone* in exchange for wealth:

"The party, you wot of, shall be min own wife." (Act II, Scene vi)

Here, marriage—ideally a moral and spiritual union—is reduced to a commercial transaction. *Celia's* objectification reflects anxieties in late sixteenth-century Britain about the commodification of women within emerging market relations. Jonson exposes how greed legitimises exploitation under the guise of pragmatism and masculine authority.

Volpone himself derives pleasure not merely from wealth but from manipulating others' greed:

"I glory
More in the cunning purchase of my wealth
Than in the glad possession." (Act I, Scene i)

This confession suggests that greed is performative and self-replicating. Volpone's delight lies in exposing the moral emptiness of others, implying that a society structured around competition and ambition inevitably rewards deception. This aligns with the political culture of Tudor England, where advancement often depended on cunning rather than virtue.

Even the play's apparent moral resolution is unsettling. Although Volpone is punished, Jonson offers no reassuring vision of moral reform. Instead, the audience is left with a society in which greed has been temporarily restrained but not eradicated. This pessimism reflects a broader sixteenth-century recognition that greed was not merely a sin to be corrected but a systemic condition tied to economic and political change.

Mosca plays the role of an obsequious yet clever fool or the parasite which were common in the plays depicting the courts of Renaissance gentlemen.

Even though Volpone is a gentleman, he utilises the techniques of a fool to earn his wealth. The entire play becomes a satire upon the concept of parasitic avarice. It is best indicated by Mosca's song in Act 1, Scene 2:

“Fools, they are the only nation
Worth men's envy or admiration...
Even his face begetteth laughter,
And he speaks truth free from slaughter”

Michel Foucault's concept of a mad man becomes quite relevant to the parasite's song. “In the Middle Ages, the discourse of a mad man didn't have the same currency as others. It seemed to contain neither truth nor importance.” Similarly, Mosca tends to attribute the speech of a fool to be discarded from social order, where he is not seen responsible for what he speaks. Mosca is a clever character who chose the life of a fool for himself and seems to be living in luxury as a parasite stuck upon a wealthy host.

It is also interesting to note that Jonson makes use of a dramatic technique called “French scene” where the unity of play rests in the revelation of the quality of a new character, the demonstrations of principal characteristics and the contribution that the character will make to the play's conflict. Hence Scene 2 also begins with the introduction of third character Voltore (Vulture) which characterises the person as a predatory bird, leading one to conclude that the vulture hovers in the court of the fox, waiting for the fox to die.

The playwright establishes an atmosphere of greed through the two characters, leading to the circumstances of their mischievous ruse. Volpone, while feigning a deadly disease, uses Mosca as an interpreter and a cohort. Voltore relies upon the assistance of Mosca to secure the will in his favor as well. In the beast fable interpretation of the scene 3, gadfly becomes the line of communication between the fox and the vulture. The vulture hovers near the dying prey and the fox plays dead to trick the hunter. The names of the characters indicate a certain tendency of avarice inside them. In furtherance of the play, more characters are introduced to indicate the competition for Volpone's gold. Corbaccio is a personification of an old crow who is on the verge of dying. He rejoices at the impending doom of mimicking Volpone:

“Excellent! Excellent! Sure I shall outlive him:
This makes me young again, a score of years”

Corbaccio's transpicuous greed was used by Mosca to coerce him into disinheriting his own son and instead sign a will upon the name of Volpone. In this manner, Mosca deceives an innocent person. But the son's disinheritance was not taken lightly by him, which added further satirical elements to the comedy of the play. Corvino, or the preening raven is another character that has been utilized as a means of research for this thesis. Even though he is quite wealthy and brings the gift of pearls and diamonds for the bedridden Volpone, his greatest treasure is his gallant wife. Corvino makes a quick exit from the scene as Mosca plays upon the idea of his wife and gives a telling remark. This causes the audience to learn about Corvino's excessive jealousy towards his wife.

Conclusion

To sum up, Volpone offers a powerful critique of greed as a defining feature of late sixteenth-century society. Through religious parody, legal corruption, familial betrayal, and sexual commodification, Jonson exposes how avarice permeates every social institution. It serves as a powerful literary lens through which to examine greed in sixteenth-century British society. Jonson's play captures the moral contradictions of an age in transition—one that condemned avarice while enabling and rewarding it. By portraying greed as pervasive, performative, and socially sanctioned, Avarice, chase for profit and indulgence in luxurious pleasures are some of the trademarks of the mercantile consumerist society. Friendships are motivated by a chase for wealth. The marriage alliances are based upon lustful beauty of women, provoking restless envy in the hearts of husbands. Jonson also plays upon the idea how the inheritance of wealth merely becomes a quest to multiply wealth. The vulture, crow and raven compete for the riches that can be achieved from the death of the fox with no kins. Yet the master of cunning had different mechanisms to dupe the duper, causing a drift in the plot of the play. Hence, the deceptive privilege of the consumerist society is satirised in a humorous manner.

Volpone reflects the ethical tensions of a society moving toward modern capitalism. The play thus stands not merely as a satire of individual vice but as a critique of a culture in which greed had become both a sin and a social norm. By embedding greed within social structures rather than individual psychology, Volpone anticipates modern critiques of capitalism and stands as a sharp literary response to the ethical crises of early modern Britain.

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