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## New plays for old : Jonson's Orton and Orton's Jonson

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# **New Plays for Old: Jonson's Orton and Orton's Jonson.**

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**Edith Cowan  
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## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to ascertain to what extent Ben Jonson's play *Volpone* can be constructed through Joe Orton's play *Loot*. I will attempt to discover how far *Loot* can be said to be of use in re-examining *Volpone* in a different light since the emergence of Orton's brand of comic drama.

I shall start by looking at influences such as Erasmus and his particular brand of humour as created in *The Praise of Folly*, and the implications for comedy that it presents in the form of the *mock encomium*. The relevance of "not what is said, but who is saying it" will be questioned and used to appropriate *Loot* as a tool to redefine *Volpone*.

In using Orton to "reinvent" Jonson I shall investigate topics such as the redefining of Jonson's comic genre in the light of Orton's "black farce", in looking at recurring themes of greed and corruption. I shall also investigate how a subtle blend of genres may have produced idiosyncratic hybrids and how the plays communicate these particular elements that they appear to have in common.

I will also examine the relationship between comedy and justice and the extent of reconciliation between the two in *Volpone* and *Loot*, with reference to punishment and with particular reference to closure.

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature.

Date. 5<sup>th</sup> March 1997.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

In David Lodge's novel *Small World*, Persse McGarrigle proclaims to a gathering of perplexed English professors that his thesis investigates T.S.Eliot's influence on Shakespeare:

"Well what I try to show," said Persse, "is that we can't avoid reading Shakespeare through the lens of T.S.Eliot's poetry. I mean, who can read *Hamlet* today without thinking of Prufrock? Who can hear the speeches of Ferdinand in *The Tempest* without being reminded of "The Fire Sermon" section of *The Waste Land* ?."<sup>1</sup>

In the amusing reversal of usual critical practice that this passage displays, there is an intriguing aspect of New Historicist criticism which begs further analysis. Two playwrights, Ben Jonson and Joe Orton, may be seen as ideal subjects for such a study. I shall attempt to ascertain to what extent Orton's *Loot* is useful in reinventing Jonson's *Volpone*, and like Persse, I shall endeavour to discover how far a text can be "relocated in time" when looked at from a perspective other than its original historical one. Can *Volpone* offer variations of itself when read through our contemporary experience of Orton's style? I hope to show that through *Loot*, a modern playwright inevitably reinvents older texts. As Jean. E. Howard comments "the historical investigator is likewise a product of history and never able to recognise otherness in its pure form, but always in part through the framework of the present".<sup>2</sup>

The Renaissance period and that of the post-industrial era can be seen to have corresponding elements in the sense that both periods reflect a sense of exhilaration and fearfulness. I would suggest that within the post-industrial period, specifically

the late nineteen fifties and throughout the nineteen sixties, offer possibilities for an even closer relationship to the Renaissance, as a time of fluctuation and change manifested in, among other indicators, the arts. The question of 'comedy': what is funny, permissible or in good taste, exhibited a crisis of identity in both periods, allowing to some extent, a re-evaluation of comic conventions of which Jonson and Orton were stylistic innovators. This fact was not lost on theatre buffs of the nineteen sixties. Ronald Bryden wrote comparing Orton to Jonson in *The Observer* in 1966<sup>3</sup> and an article from *The Evening Standard* in 1967 emphasised the similarities between the drama of both periods:

Among the fashionable nonsense talked about 'swinging London' one truth stands out: the drama in London is in one of the most vigorous and exciting phases of its history. Probably not since the Elizabethans has it displayed so much richness, colour, depth and imagination... Above all this resurgence of the drama is due to the new writers, who have sprung up since the end of the war. They are the ultimate source of vitality. Osborne, Pinter, Wesker, Arden, Orton: these are the names that stimulate our minds, invigorate our culture, and irritate our conscience. <sup>4</sup>

In Jean. E. Howard's words: "Both periods can be construed as existing inside a gap in history, when the paradigms that structured the past seem facile and new".<sup>5</sup>

# Folly



In Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly* Clarence H. Miller has made the observation that it is Folly herself who praises her own virtues, and it is therefore, self praise from an unreliable source:

Folly is being praised and therefore is praiseworthy. What is said often seems right, but if we consider the source, we know it must be wrong.<sup>6</sup>

The nature of Erasmus' mock encomium can be seen to be duplicitous, as it offers advice from the character of Folly, who is a professional spokeswoman for the natural fool. Folly, the noun for the behaviour of a fool, had as early as 1303 been defined as "pleasure" and "lewdness" in the New English Dictionary.<sup>7</sup> This however, allowed for an opposed feeling that the fool got more pleasure out of life than the virtuous, and was therefore more sensible; to commit follies was never to be the imbecile; with Dr. Johnson nobly insisting that "Thy love of folly and thy scorn of fools".<sup>8</sup> The natural fool has no worries, is unaware of his lowly position, is pitied and extracts compassion from everyone. A natural fool because of his innocent disposition is blissfully happy and ignorant of the world's terrors:

In brief, they are not harried by the thousands of cares to which this life is subject. They feel no shame, no fear, no ambition, no envy, no love<sup>9</sup>

Although the mock encomium refers to professionals as wise men, in comparison with natural fools they are regarded as inferior, as their seriousness and intellect

render them subject to a stoic and lonely existence, and so they are inevitably, the bigger fools:

Imagine, if you please, a model of wisdom to set over against the fool... a man who even in the rest of his life has not tasted the finest crumb of pleasure, always frugal, poor, gloomy, surly, unfair and harsh to himself, severe and hateful to others, wasted away into a pale, thin, sickly, bleary-eyed figure, old and grey long before his time, hastening to a premature grave... <sup>10</sup>

The natural fool is happy because of his ignorant foolishness and the professional is unhappy due to his knowledge and expectations. In this way the mock encomium praises that which is not really praiseworthy, the natural fool and the state of foolishness, and condemns the learned and admired, as fools to themselves.

Erasmus' adaptation of the mock encomium in *The Praise of Folly*, is unique in its positioning of the subject of the speech as the speaker also. It can be traced to only two classical examples, Lucian's *Phalaris* in which the tyrant speaks his own praises, <sup>11</sup> and Aristophanes' *Plutus*, in which Poverty delivers an encomium of herself. <sup>12</sup> However, Erasmus' choice of the topic of foolishness is doubly effective, as by making the subject of the encomium also the author, it gives the concept of foolishness and its praise another dimension; as Walter Kaiser comments: "to conceive of *Moriae* as both objective and subjective genitive". <sup>13</sup> Erasmus' reversal of credibility using speaker as subject of the distinction between fools, can be adapted to produce a variation on the usual negative reading of Volpone's character.

*Volpone* opens with the lines:

Good morning to the day; and, next my gold!  
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint  
Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is  
The teeming earth to see the longed for sun

Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram,  
Am I, to view thy splendour, darkening his;  
That, lying here, amongst my other hoards,  
Show'st like a flame, by night; or like the day  
Struck out of Chaos, when all darkness fled  
Unto the centre. O, thou son of Sol,  
But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,  
With adoration, thee, and every relic  
Of sacred treasure, in this blessed room.

(1.1.1-13).

This speech, placing gold above all else, attempts to position Volpone as heretic, and is usually read as an indication of Volpone's debasement. As an opening speech it is shocking, but also manipulative; it strongly urges a closed reading of Volpone's character as a greedy, indulgent, and morally depraved miscreant. With this emphatic start to the play, the die would seem to be cast, irrevocably condemning Volpone to the status of moral and spiritual degenerate. However, Volpone's praise of gold may be unreliable in the light of his apparent addiction to deception. Volpone's love of gold may merely be a means to an end, as although he praises gold, he does so in the form of a mock encomium, and so casts doubt on the authenticity of the praise.

The praise of gold indicating the debased nature of Volpone's life is further enhanced by his minions, who fawn and flatter him, aiding him in his quest for wealth. The opening speech in praise of gold is echoed by the three deformed servants' praise of fools, reinforcing the appearance of Volpone's existence as shallow, and his morals lapsed:

Fools they are the only nation  
Worth men's envy, or admiration;  
Free from care, or sorrow taking,  
Selves, and others merry making;  
All they speak, or do, is sterling

(1.2.66-71).

In the fools' song can be seen parallels with Erasmus' mock encomium to foolishness. In contrast to the praise of gold spoken by an influential citizen, Volpone, there is a mock encomium to fools, spoken by a trio of misfits. The praise of gold from an esteemed member of society does not appear as ridiculous as fools praising themselves. In the two kinds of mock encomium we can detect the traces of Erasmus' basic concept in *The Praise of Folly*, the reversal of the usual recipients of admiration or disdain. Volpone, a moral degenerate, praises gold, which is generally thought to be good, while the fools, unwitting in their innocent foolishness, praise themselves. The relevance of the dwarf, eunuch and hermaphrodite goes beyond a comic appropriation of deformity as funny, as their physical deformity is possibly suggestive of a moral one, and they are reminders that Volpone's pursuit of wealth and pleasure is to the exclusion of begetting healthy heirs. This serves to reinforce both a moral and physical degradation that surrounds Volpone, and parades his deformed "family" as a living testament to his immoral lifestyle. Volpone's disposition is perceived as abhorrent by the 'unnaturally' corrupt nature of his desire for gold, symbolised by the illogical and "unnatural" physically deformed trio singing the praise of fools.

Erasmus' concept of discouraging belief in what is said by merging subject and speaker, is an essential component in Joe Orton's *Loot*. Orton had commented that he admired Lucian<sup>14</sup> and *Loot* bears definite traces of Lucian's disclaimer that "I have no intention whatever of telling the truth... So mind you do not believe a word I say".<sup>15</sup> The comedy in *Loot* is manifest by the subtle irony of misplaced convictions

and ambiguous sincerity, and is measured by the extent in which reactions are rational in the given circumstances, which are often bizarre and offer no point of reference to a "sane" audience. In *Loot* there is no 'safe' ground, the characters display an alarming capacity to deceive at will, which commences from the first scene with Fay's comment to McLeavy:

I'm a nice person. One in a million.  
(p.195).

This seemingly trivial self appraisal by Fay highlights the importance of what is said in *Loot*, showing lies and deception to be the main focus of the play's action. At the start of *Loot* we have no idea of the murderous nature of Fay, the agency nurse, but the line sets the tone for the furious reversal of all normal moral qualms explored during the course of the play's action. Fay certainly turns out to be "one in a million" whose "niceness" is exposed by Truscott, who may come close to being her equal in his unscrupulous disregard for convention:

Fay: You must prove me guilty. That is the law.  
Truscott: You know nothing of the law. I know nothing of  
the law. That makes us equal in the sight of the  
law  
(p.254).

Thus the nature of Fay's self recommendation is revealed by Truscott, himself tentative in his application of the truth. Fay's opening lines to McLeavy can be seen as the creation of a mock encomium to herself, the truth of which can only be determined by Truscott, a character who is her equal in moral corruption.

Truscott's suspicious and perverse sense of justice adheres him to the consummate liar, Dennis, rather than to Hal, who has an unusual impediment for a criminal, that of honesty. However, this proves to be the only quality that, when



appropriated by Dennis ( who does not suffer from the same affliction) is effective in winning Truscott's trust:

Truscott: Where's it buried?  
Dennis: Buried?  
Truscott: Your mate says it's been buried.  
Dennis: He's a liar!  
Truscott: A very intelligent reply. You're an honest lad.  
(p.245).

This reversal of honesty as the best policy supports Erasmus' character Folly's claim that deception is a form of kindly diversion from a stark reality:

But to be deceived, they say, is miserable. Quite the contrary - not to be deceived is the most miserable of all. For nothing could be further from the truth than the notion that man's happiness resides in things as they actually are. <sup>16</sup>

*Loot* appears to utilise the unruly nature of Erasmus' brand of comedy, reversing the normal assessment of morality. A major source of the play's humour is created in the opposition of a traditional moral code of society and the selfish code of ethics in *Loot*. Goran Nieragden comments: "Orton confronts the audience with what must be to them palpable absurdities of language and thought, but, at the same time, depicts these as "normal" and well founded from the characters viewpoints". <sup>17</sup> *Loot* reinforces the connections with the audience of a perceived normality by creating dialogue which is a pastiche of British pop and working class culture. Using everyday speech, professional jargon and the over simplification of tabloid headlines, the play blends a recognisable world with fiction in a wicked concoction of piss taking and dead pan seriousness. The language is eccentric in its smooth detachment of emotion belying the intimacy of the subject matter:

Hal: Perfectly preserved body of a woman. No sign of foul play. The uniform we'll burn. The underwear you can keep.

Fay: Your mother's underclothes?

Hal: All good stuff.

Fay: I couldn't. Our sizes vary.

Hal: For the bonfire then. Her teeth can go in the river.

(p224).

Orton himself insists on a "straight" interpretation of the dialogue being the only method to fully realise the comic aspects of *Loot*, indicating a debt to Erasmus in the necessary ability to disguise foolishness in a cloak of reasonableness in order for the true nature of the comedy to become apparent. Orton's production notes to The Royal Court Theatre Company outlined the style of acting needed to accentuate the comedy in his work:

Every line should be played with desperate seriousness and complete lack of any suggestion of humour... There must never, from the actors, be the least hint of send up. The most ludicrous lines... must be played quite sincerely. Unless it's real it won't be funny. Everything the characters say is *true*.

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In this way the comedy in *Loot* aligns itself with Erasmus in the concept of praising people who are not worthy, as in *misrule*, or the turning of accepted values upside down. Like the praise of the mock encomium, the ridiculous nature of the character's foibles must be played as "normal" habits. In *Loot* the characters (with the exception of McLeavy) are realised as perverse and antisocial, and for this to work as humour, complete sincerity must accompany the delivery of often challenging dialogue:

Hal: Afterwards I'll take you to a remarkable brothel I've found. Really remarkable. Run by three Pakistanis aged between ten and fifteen. They do it for sweets. Part of their religion. Meet me at seven. Stock up with Mars bars

(p.267).

The first production of *Loot* (1965) staged at the Wimbledon Theatre and later the Arts Theatre Cambridge, directed by Peter Wood, and with Kenneth Williams as Truscott, failed to recognise the importance of Orton's insistence on absolute sincerity on the part of the actors. Orton's artistic vision of *Loot* was shattered by Peter Wood's direction when Wood intoned "This play is essentially stylistic. I wanted the dialogue delivered in a stylistic fashion".<sup>19</sup> At the Cambridge production, the performances were turned out towards the audience rather than towards each other; the effect was to make *Loot* more like a cabaret than a farce ensemble. The producer, Michael Codron, commented on *Loot's* debut with special reference to Kenneth Williams' pantomime style interpretation of Truscott:

Kenneth, having decided he couldn't be himself, was playing Truscott like Himmler. He decided to disguise himself like a little gestapo in this extraordinary mackintosh. Nothing happened<sup>20</sup>

The "over the top", high camp style of Williams' performance appears to have completely dissolved the innovative inversion of Erasmus' style of humour which applauds the honesty and innocence of fools, cultivated by Orton to embody the concept of deception presented as normality. Instead the foolishness inherent in the character of Truscott was overtly exploited, thereby rendering the necessary underlying malice redundant. The emptiness of the words balanced by their unrelenting forceful delivery is the nucleus of *Loot's* style, but it is also relevant that the reverse is true. The truth, when it does make an appearance, has as its vehicle the truly innocent McLeavy, who, for his pains, is made the scapegoat for the other characters. In *The Praise of Folly* a recommendation of the attribute of honesty in fools can be applied quite literally to McLeavy's situation and character:

And don't forget another talent, by no means contemptible, that is peculiar to fools: they alone speak the plain unvarnished truth... Whatever a fool has in his heart, he reveals in his face and expresses in his speech.<sup>21</sup>

In an overturning of prescribed values, Erasmus' humour proclaiming the innocence of fools the only truth, returns to its natural home in the character of McLeavy, after a sojourn with *Loot*'s more anarchic characters:

I'm innocent! I'm innocent! (At the door, pause, a last wail)  
Oh, what a terrible thing to happen to a man whose been  
kissed by the Pope

(p.274).

Orton's development of this style, emphasising the vulnerability of *Loots* only honest character by portraying him as a misfit and punishing him accordingly, persuades us to give seemingly amoral characters a greater freedom. Their versions of the truth, even if we do not believe them, appear more attractive as they are in the majority, and we do not want to be associated with a lone fool, even if he is an honest one.

In reinventing *Volpone* through *Loot* it is useful to appropriate Erasmus' brand of comedy to establish the pretext that, what is being said is not as important as who is saying it. Although the fundamental essence of *Volpone*, society is the accumulation of wealth and power to the exclusion of all else, and cannot be dismissed as a prime source of richness in the play, using *Loot* we can expand our options allowing for a more varied and enlightening interpretation. The more usual reading of *Volpone* can be sharpened to include a broader range of comedy, that is

more apparent after the application of Orton's "black comic" style. As the opening speech in praise of gold progresses, it is perhaps possible that there is an alternative reading of Volpone's irreligious worship of wealth:

Letting the cherry knock against their lips,  
And draw it, by their mouths, and back again

(1.1.89-90).

By referring to the potential legacy hunters, and how he will tease them with false promises of wills and inheritances, Volpone is both highlighting the "mock" in the mock encomium, and utilising it as an indication of his real intention and motivation, while letting us in on the joke. It is possible to detect a thread of sarcastic irony, in the opening speech of *Volpone*, through *Loot's* preoccupation with verbal insincerity, in which Volpone can be given credit for a magnificent prevarication. Volpone's praise of gold can suddenly be seen as a decoy, aimed at the revelation of *real* greed, encompassed by Voltore, Corvino and Corbaccio. As in Erasmus' defence of *The Praise of Folly*:

Joking provided an attractive means of introducing serious ideas. Scholars, like any other class of men, should be allowed their *lusus* especially if frivolity leads on to serious matters.<sup>22</sup>

The mock encomium no longer epitomises Volpone's greed and preoccupation with riches, but those of his legacy hunting associates. When the text of *Volpone* is fully "trusted", the tendency is for the character of Volpone to come off badly, but when the incongruous style of the dialogue spoken by *Loot's* characters intercepts, the options become much wider. This is demonstrated by Mosca's observation to Volpone that those who have wealth and status, and so appear wise, are often merely masking foolishness:

O, no: rich  
Implies it. Hood an ass with reverend purple,  
So you can hide his two ambitious ears,  
And he shall pass for a cathedral doctor

(1.2. 112-115).

Mosca is asserting that any fool's speech, when declared by a respected man, will be believed, and often the true meaning is missed; and the praise of gold is revealed as a decoy for Volpone's true motivation, when read with *Loot* in mind, as it offers the option of disbelief. Volpone can be seen to have a larger agenda, and the praise of gold merely acts as a lure to expose the corruption and greed of his associates. In the opening speech, John Creaser proposes that: "Volpone is not praying, he is performing";<sup>23</sup> the question becomes not one of Volpone's greed or acquisitiveness, but of the larger theme of moral decline in Volpone's society which he chooses to exploit through his accomplished exhibitions of theatrical dexterity.

The character of Mosca provides us with another example of how *Loot* can offer a variation on the literal reading of *Volpone*. Mosca's talent for deception obeys no loyalty, but it becomes evident from the start that, when looked at from the perspective of *Loot*, Mosca's words have the ring of dubious sincerity endemic to Orton's dialogue:

Tear forth the fathers of poor families  
Out of their beds, and coffin them alive  
In some kind clasping prison, where their bones  
May be forthcoming, when the flesh is rotten:  
But your sweet nature doth abhor these courses;  
You loath, the widow's, or the orphan's tears  
Should wash your pavements; or their piteous cries  
Ring in your roofs; and beat the air, for vengeance -

(1.1.44-51).

This speech praises Volpone, but can be seen to emulate Erasmus' humour in its praise of goodness for the wrong reasons. Volpone may indeed refrain from imprisoning debtors, but this can be seen as being merely for his own convenience, as there is no evidence in the play that he pities either widows or orphans. His later treatment of Celia suggests a complete lack of compassion of any sort, and although childless, Volpone is presented as only giving succour to an amusing band of misfits primarily for his own entertainment. If Mosca's sincerity is ironic, Volpone's munificence is purely selfish, and this concept becomes more apparent in *Volpone* after studying Orton's blacker adaptation of Erasmus' principle. What is an ironic sincerity praising Volpone's generosity turns full circle, as ironic sincerity turns to ambiguous black humour:

Sure, sir? Why, look you, credit your own sense  
The pox approach, and add to your diseases,  
If it would send you hence the sooner, sir  
For, your incontinence, it hath deserved it  
Thoroughly and thoroughly, and the plague to boot

(1.5.51-55).

This becomes a complicated double dupe as the plot develops and Mosca deceives Voltore, Corvino, Corbaccio and indeed Volpone at the same time. Mosca is privy to Volpone's ambitions, but they are not the same as those he discloses to the three legacy hunters. Mosca is defending his master's interests, but it becomes apparent he is also protecting his own; Mosca's remarks, although adding to the gulling, are convincingly abusive and leaves one wondering if indeed they are not Mosca's true feelings being expressed. Here, Mosca is the epitome of duplicity as he plays one character off on the other, he is telling a double lie, gulling Voltore,

Corvino and Corbaccio, but also freely expressing a wish for Volpone to really be “sent hence the sooner”. Mosca’s ambition turns the whole order of things upside down, until eventually in a final twist of fate, he is himself made victim to the instability inherent in the nature of deception. The possible ambiguity in the above speech is again recalled towards the end of *Volpone* when Mosca, revelling in his role as “devil’s advocate” out tricks himself as Volpone detects the ambiguity in Mosca’s hitherto seemingly genuine loyalty:

Mosca: What busy knave is this! Most reverend fathers,  
I sooner, had attended your grave pleasures,  
But that my order for the funeral  
Of my dear patron did require me-  
Volpone: Mosca!  
Mosca: Whom I intend to bury, like a gentleman.  
Volpone: Aye, quick, and cozen me of all

(5.12.55-59).

Mosca’s “bury” adopts a variety of connotations. Does Mosca intend to bury his master in riches, or does he refer to a literal burial beneath the earth? When looked at with the verbal deception inherent in *Loot*, Mosca’s fashioning of a sinister double dupe highlights the possibility of considering “burying” Volpone in the metaphorical sense of betraying him. Mosca’s earlier praises of Volpone are perhaps seen in a different light, as the realisation of Erasmus’ principle of truth spoken by fools is combined with *Loot*’s important emphasis on the unreliability of the speaker.



# Farce



*Volpone*'s plot revolves around the theme of legacy hunting, and this topic had provided a fruitful source for ancient comedy; Horace wrote of the dishonesty of accumulating wealth by pandering and deception: "Some men rejoice to farm state revenues, some with tit bits and fruit hunt miserly widows, and net old men to stock their preserves, with many their money grows with interest unobserved".<sup>24</sup> Thus the subject of legacy hunting provided a vehicle for *Volpone* to present a topical issue. The form of farce which allows for malice as well as humour; obvious deceptions and conceits, lend themselves well to farce as they require a good deal of concealment, rivalry and well timed manipulation. However, a controversy accorded to *Volpone*, the incompatibility of comedy and farce, was a question for conjecture in 1753, when commented upon by Richard Hurd:

...the perfection of comedy lying in the accuracy and fidelity of universal representation, and farce professedly neglecting or rather wantonly transgressing the limits of common nature and just decorum, they clash entirely with each other. And comedy must so far fail of giving the pleasure, appropriate to its design, as it allies itself with farce, while farce on the other hand, forfeits the use, it intends, of promoting popular ridicule, by restraining itself within the cautious rules of decency, which comedy exacts.<sup>25</sup>

A century after *Volpone* was first performed, the merger of comedy and farce does not appear to have been received as a complimentary one. In farce, characters are often rudimentary, but sets and props elaborate in the frenzied chase that usually circles back to its point of origin. The topic of legacy hunting which occupied Horace proved sympathetic to farcical treatment for consumption by the English fed on stories of the wicked and lustful disposition of Renaissance Italy, and Venice in

particular. Italy was renowned as a hot bed of vice and greed, as shown by Thomas Nash in his highly popular *Pierce Penniless's Supplication to the Devil*, published in 1592: "O Italie, the academy of man-slaughter, the sporting place of murther, the apothecary shop of poyson for all nations! how many kinds of weapons hast thou inuented for malice".<sup>26</sup> With this kind of reputation, Italy provided an ideal setting for *Volpone* allowing for extremes of behaviour typical of a farcical style, which would be perhaps construed as misconceived, or even offensive, in an English context:

Mosca: He will not hear of drugs.  
Corbaccio: Why? I myself  
                  Stood by, while't was made; saw all th' ingredients;  
                  And know, it cannot but most gently work.  
                  My life for his, 'tis but to make him sleep.  
Mosca: Ay, his last sleep, if he would take it.

(1.3.14-18)

The mistrust of Corbaccio's potion by Mosca, alludes to a certain laxity on the part of Corbaccio's physician, and supports Nashe's claim that Italy was indeed thought to be the apothecary shop of poison. The continuous pursuit of *Volpone* by the three legacy hunters creates ample opportunity for contrived and complex plots which are the essence of farce:

What thoughts he has, without, now, as he walks:  
That this might be the last gift he should give;  
That this would fetch you; if you died today,  
And gave him all, what he should be tomorrow;  
What large return would come of all his ventures;  
How he should worshipped be, and revered;  
Ride, with his furs, and footcloths...

(1.2.100-106).

Mosca's contempt for the greedy ambitions of Voltore show a remarkable similarity to a passage from *Mulcaster*, written in 1581, suggesting the discontent felt in England at the unorthodox methods popularly being applied to acquire wealth that are apparent in *Volpone*: "Those who schemed for wealth, that Jack may be a gentleman, impoverished many others, and though they do not profess the impoverishing of purpose, yet their kind of dealing doth pierce as it passeth: and a thousand pound gain bowls down twenty thousand persons".<sup>27</sup> However, with ever growing cities the opportunities for dubious occupations and disreputable professions multiplied.<sup>28</sup> The schemes of Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino to acquire wealth through insincere flattery in obtaining deceased estates such as Volpone's, are in direct contrast to the pride of Volpone's claim to wealth without the taint of labour, trade or usury:

Since I gain  
No common way: I use no trade, no venture...  
(1.1. 32-33).

I turn no moneys in the public bank;  
Nor usure private-  
(1.1. 39-40)

Volpone is here disassociating himself from the common herd and reflecting on the same dubious money making schemes that *Mulcaster* disapproved of and which legacy hunting was the most distasteful. As John Creaser has noted "in part Volpone is a moralist, contemptuous of current profiteering and fiddles. He also takes ethically dubious activities and gives them a sinister twist".<sup>29</sup> The legacy hunting theme cultivated by Jonson for drama, from Lucian's original dialogue *How to Enjoy Life After Seventy* provided the template for the action of *Volpone*:

Polystratus: But my dear fellow, it all came pouring in free, gratis, and for nothing! First thing every morning there'd be a crowd of visitors at my door, bringing me all sorts of splendid presents from all over the world.

Simylus: Why, did you become a dictator or something after my death?

Polystratus: No, but I had a tremendous number of admirers.

Simylus: Admirers! At your age? With only four teeth in your head? Don't make me laugh!

Polystratus: It's perfectly true, I assure you, and they were all extremely important people. Old as I was and, as you see, completely bald, with watery eyes and a perpetually running nose, there was nothing they liked better than making love to me- and if I so much as glanced at one of them, he was happy for the day.<sup>30</sup>

In the gap dividing the ethical standards of *Volpone* with those of *Voltore*, Corbaccio and Corvino, explored through the legacy hunting plot, lies the nucleus for the possibility of farce. When combined with clandestine behaviour and underhand activities, such as the macabre vigil at old mens' bedsides in order to secure an inheritance, the frantic and obsessive elements of farce take on an uneasy moral dimension which is blacker and more conscientiously intrusive than farce alone.

Orton's contribution to the form of farce is in his development of an irreverent style which has often been called "black farce". This kind of black humour as analysed by Alice Rayner, is indicative of *Loot* and presents us with one of the tools with which to view *Volpone*:

This dystopian comedy is an 'unkind' form because it establishes a world via caricature that is wholly humoured, obsessed, or evil and seeks to purge, cleanse and purify it entirely. The dystopian comedy is perhaps closer to tragedy because it conceives the world in absolutes and totalities;

there is no kindness, nothing softens the harsh action of total obsession.<sup>31</sup>

Rayner's description of an unkind comedy, is very close to what Orton himself said about *Loot*:

Ideally it should be nearer *The Homecoming* rather than *I Love Lucy*. Don't think I'm a snob about *I Love Lucy*. I've watched it often. I think it's very funny. But it's aimed purely at making an audience laugh. And that isn't the prime aim of *Loot*...<sup>32</sup>

In insisting that he was a moralist and his plays moral, Orton confused and angered many critics and much of the public by disguising himself as an immoralist in order to examine the morals of his age, and by extending the complexities of plot and psychological reversals to the extremes of farce, Orton finds a theatrical format whose size and tone match the pseudo sanity he wants to expose.<sup>33</sup> Susan Sontag has coined the term 'black camp' which has as its essence "a love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration, it is characterised by travesty, impersonation and theatricality".<sup>34</sup> That style can be detected as common to English farce and has been remarked upon by Baudelaire, who was intrigued by the comparatively benign antics of the French clown, when compared to his English counterpart:

He yells at the top of his lungs. Then the knife drops on his head which is all scarlet and white, and you see the head rolling across the stage, the bleeding neck and the broken vertebrae. Then suddenly, moved by the unquenchable egotism which is the hallmark of the English clown, Pierrot goes running wildly after his own head, with exactly the same gestures as previously he had run after a ham or a bottle of wine, and he proudly puts his head in his own pocket. The English must possess a special gift for exaggeration, for I found these monstrous farces took on the air of a strangely convincing reality.<sup>35</sup>

What is prominently offered to us in *Loot* is this kind of freedom to laugh outright at violence and malice. In this blacker kind of farce we are not asked to coyly simper at sentimental seduction, as in *School for Scandal* or politely applaud adultery, as in *Noises Off*, but to allow free reign to the primal instincts without guilt or remorse, and to thoroughly enjoy it. We are persuaded, against our better judgement, to align with characters whose antics employ a deplorable ingenuity, coupled with an overriding instinct for self preservation and fuelled by an uncontrollable egotism.

Black farce then, would seem to incorporate elements of the form primarily as a cover to accentuate the underlying violence. Leonard C. Pronko, writing in 1975, comments on how modern farce took on a blacker interior, while the exterior remained:

Lurking beneath the frenetically joyous surface however, is a vision of the world in explosion, which was to go almost unnoticed until the mid twentieth century- a vision which gives depth and bite to comedies and farces which might otherwise have perished along with the halcyon days they depict.<sup>36</sup>

The twentieth century brought this mixture of terror and joy that Pronko describes and exploited it through the medium of cinema. In silent movies such as those made by Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, the vision was often of man against a hostile new environment regulated and controlled by machines:

As for the Charlie who appears in *Modern Times*, he has one good look at industry and flees in terror. Life in a dog kennel, he suggests, is better than life in a cogwheel... for the agony of our time is precisely that we are caught up in the wheels of machines that have never known where they are going and never will know. Slowly, ineluctably, the machine is

beginning to master us. As so often in Chaplin's films, the comedy is pure terror.<sup>37</sup>

Orton's development of farce into black farce is a product of this vision. His landscapes are bleak and sterile, with the individual's chance of survival lying in his devotion to himself; all the characters in *Loot* have something to hide, except McLeavy who is punished for his lack of cunning and open naiveté. In a grotesque yet comic vision, each character's freedom or enrichment simultaneously diminishes another's. If *Loot* appears so appalling to some audiences it is because it refuses to return them to the safety zone of the status quo, it emphasises the futility of fighting against the machine, which in *Loot* is manifest by "the system" which is corrupt and inescapable. The characters who win in the end do so by joining the system, not by beating it, while the stubborn innocence of McLeavy banishes him from society. He, like Charlie, loses his position as a cog in the machine and is relegated to the doghouse, yet by taking the characteristics of farce (unbounded lust, animality, avarice and ridiculous pursuit) Orton takes this injustice and presents it as the normal human condition. The blackness of his farce style lies in the characters' guilt-free dispositions; they feel no sense of shame, and therefore ask for no atonement. Joan F. Dean remarks:

Orton's indifference to morals, at least as the term morals is conventionally used, produced a decidedly bleak and deeply disquieting, yet vigorous insight into humanity's truest wishes and most closely guarded desires. His perception of human nature is neither attractive or optimistic, but by embodying it in farce, Orton realised the possibility for farce to convey a sense of the boundless, the unlimited, the Dionysiac.<sup>38</sup>

The concept of the 'body' has a great part to play in the execution of farce, and in black farce it appears in an even more manic and desperate guise. The climax



of the action at a point where the characters are completely obsessed by their objective, is often represented in farce by the hysterical action of bodies (alive or dead) appearing and disappearing through doors and windows, behind curtains and underneath beds. The treatment of the late Mrs McLeavy in *Loot* supports the view that man, when placed in a farcical world, rejects the usual social and moral conventions of his society, to the point where he becomes little more than an animal.

Eric Bentley comments:

Man, says farce, may or may not be one of the more intelligent animals, he is certainly an animal, and not one of the least violent either. He may dedicate what little intelligence he possesses precisely to violence, to plotting violence, or to dreaming violence.<sup>39</sup>

Human emotions such as compassion, are squeezed out of existence, becoming subservient to an all pervasive primitive survival instinct.

Dennis: Won't she rot it? The body juices? I can't believe  
it's possible.

Hal: She's embalmed. Good for centuries.

(p.208).

In *Loot* the body of Mrs McLeavy performs an important function as it is the catalyst for the manic action of the play. It is frantically repositioned throughout, and so becomes a focal point for the action around which the other characters revolve, what Bentley calls "theatre of the surrealist body".<sup>40</sup> The action is fast and unrelenting, leaving little time for debate as the characters become caricatures, their idiosyncrasies accentuated towards surrealism. If the corpse in *Loot* provides a catalyst for the action, the living perpetrators compensate for its lack of activity in a

form of “life horribly accentuated”.<sup>41</sup> This is most evident in *Loot* by the transference of Mrs McLeavy’s body from one hideous hiding place to another, throughout the course of the play, displaying a kind of contemporary violence, passive yet horrific.

Modern violence, Martin Esslin has suggested, is a subtler form of violence. He compares modern psychological violence with a more robust earlier tradition, where “actors attacked each other with swords, bespattering each other and the audience with pig’s blood concealed in a bladder beneath their jerkins”.<sup>42</sup> It may be that a modern audience, being desensitised to the living stage by television and film, can no longer feel the same thrill when confronted with a stage fight. The violence in the modern theatre takes other forms such as in the farcical expression of frantic pace and verbal insincerity displayed in *Loot*. Orton’s characters display a comic dispassionate air, while a sense of detachment masks the blackness of the underlying violence:

Fay: Yes. My husbands died. I’ve had seven altogether. One a year on average since I was sixteen. I’m extravagant you see. And then I lived under stress near Penzance for some time. I’ve had trouble with institutions. Lack of funds. A court case with my hairdresser. I’ve been reduced to asking people for money before now.

McLeavy: Did they give it to you?

Fay: Not willingly. They had to be persuaded (with a bright smile) I shall accompany you to your lawyers. After the reading of your wife’s will you may need skilled medical attention

(p.202-203).

This short dialogue near the start of *Loot* merges a bland honesty on the surface with an underlying suggestion of violence that becomes more evident as the play develops. Eric Bentley remarks: “Farce concentrates itself in the actor’s body, and

the dialogue in farce is, so to speak, the activity of the vocal chords and the cerebral cortex".<sup>43</sup> The character of Fay is, in real terms, a psychopath. She is a mass murderer who displays no remorse, but the murders have all been committed off stage before the action begins. It is therefore possible for Fay to maintain a composed confidence that renders any actual physical violence in *Loot* (such as Truscott's beating of Hal) rather less impressively sinister or menacing than her off stage collection of murdered husbands, or cool disposal of Mrs McLeavy. There appears to be no saving grace in any of the characters, indeed the yardstick by which the audience may wish to measure the immorality of a character is the degree by which another character outshines him in his violence and corruptibility. Hal, who has maintained the most sacrilegious attitude towards his mother's corpse, is miraculously transformed into a victim by the extra aggressive authoritarian figure of Inspector Truscott:

Hal: (Desperate, trying to protect himself) In church! In church! My dad's watching the last rites of a hundred and four thousand quid! (Truscott jerks Hal from the floor, beating and kicking and punching him. He screams with pain).

Truscott: I'll hose you down! I'll chlorinate you! (Hal tries to defend himself, his nose is bleeding)

(p.236).

The overt physical violence of Truscott works as a comparison which serves to weaken Hal's criminal disposition, while the slapstick style of the violence acts as a counter foil to Fay's discreet and tidy murders. Chaplin recognised the symbiotic relationship between comedy and violence in the portrayal of his characters and comments:

Criminals, you know, and artists are psychologically akin.  
Both have a burning flame of impulse, a vision, a deep sense  
of lawlessness. <sup>44</sup>

From this remark it is possible to deduce that Chaplin saw an element of destruction in creativity which is evident in his films. Fay's detached aloofness, coupled with Truscott's overt violence can be seen to have parallels with Chaplin's comic figure, the little tramp, who is allowed to stuff character's heads into gas lamps and drop pianos on to unsuspecting policemen's heads.

The characters in *Loot* all believe in what they are doing, and in that sense can be said to be 'pure'; the goals and methods of the criminal characters may not be generally condoned, but they, unlike McLeavy, have no illusions regarding the hypercritical and brutal nature of society they live in.

D. A. N. Jones comments on Leo McKern's performance of Volpone at the Oxford Playhouse in 1966 pointing out the similarities with "recent English comedy of the kind represented by Joe Orton's *Loot*, especially in its mixture of farcical and the grotesque". <sup>45</sup> Instead of despising Volpone for his greedy nature, we can see his ulterior motive is to expose the corruption and insincerity of his society, a much blacker and all encompassing theme than the mere degradation of an individual:

This draws new clients, daily, to my house,  
Women, and men, of every sex and age,  
That bring me presents, send me plate, coin, jewels,  
With hope that when I die (which they expect  
each greedy minute) it shall then return,  
Tenfold upon them

(1.2.76-80).

When the text of *Volpone* is projected forward to meet an Ortonesque interpretation, rather than backwards to a Lucianic one, Volpone's postulations on his situation appear in tune with our experience of modern black farce. Thus the legacy hunting theme moves away from being merely a vehicle with which to denounce Volpone, and rejustifies itself as a tool for exposing the corrupter aspects of Jacobean society.

The pursuit of profit in *Volpone* underlies the moral laxity of the main pillars of Volpone's society, the influential professionals and wealthy merchants such as Voltore, Corvino and Corbaccio. As in *Loot*, characters who normally are the mainstay of society, are only interested in their own profit. The creation of a genre by Jonson which has successfully incorporated farce as a truly comic element, in *Volpone* begins with merely planned deception on the part of Volpone and Mosca. However, the continual unmasking of situations indicative to farce, become blacker as the play progresses and deals with subjects such as corruption, attempted rape, assault and fraudulent deception.

Farce, then, would seem to be an ideal and effective medium for creation of a hybrid "grey area" where the usually repressed side of the psyche is allowed free reign in an atmosphere of uncontrolled havoc and unrestrained malice, resulting in the creation of black farce. Bentley's definition of farce make it possible for *Volpone* to be *completely* appreciated, by opening the play to modern interpretations. His suggestion that the allowance of otherwise unacceptable violence in farce is due to the abstract nature of that violence, and establishes a precedent that alienates its morally debatable aspects:

One kind of farce, then, turns characters into caricatures, emphasises the body at the expense of the spirit, and mocks

altruism and morality. It deliberately dehumanises its characters, or subordinates humans to objects .<sup>46</sup>

Bentley's comment can be applied to Mrs McLeavy as a catalyst for the frantic action, to reinvent an area of *Volpone* that is usually read as merely pertinent on a moral level. The character of Celia can be seen to have parallels with Mrs McLeavy, and her relationship with Volpone has aspects not dissimilar to Hal's treatment of his late mother.

Gamini Salgado has commented: " the phosphorescent beauty of Volpone's seduction speech to Celia, and his readiness to match all the heedless waste and debauchery of former times for the sake of sexual stimulation is a blasphemous inversion of values".<sup>47</sup> However, this scene can also be a prelude not to sexual satisfaction, as Salgado suggests, but rather a translation of Volpone's sensuality into acquisitiveness:

A diamant, would have brought Lollia Paulina,  
When she came in, like star light, hid with jewels  
That were the spoils of provinces;  
(3.7.195-197).

The opulent imagery of this speech serves to show how Celia, as passive victim, can be seen in terms of an object, an inanimate body, in much the same way as Mrs McLeavy's body is used in *Loot*. The splendour with which Volpone woos Celia, is also an expression of his dismissive attitude to her as anything more than a possession. This is proved when, after satisfying his own theatrical aspirations in the lavish and richly extravagant nature of his declarations, he abruptly changes tack and reveals his impatience and authority:

I do degenerate, and abuse my nation,  
To play with opportunity, thus long;

I should have done the act, and then parleyed.  
Yield, or I'll force thee

(3.7.263-266).

Volpone's anticipated pleasure may not be entirely sexual as he may be revelling in the prospect of sex merely because it is the most powerful form of 'one up-manship'. This is less about sex than about power, in a society where the ability of Volpone to swindle his victims of their wealth and possessions reduces their position in society, while elevating his own. Volpone has already confided to Mosca his love of the chase, revealing that the "cunning purchase" is in fact the stimulus and not the "glad possession" (1.1.65-66). This point is further supported by Corvino, his treatment of Celia aligns with Volpone's, and goes so far as to literally illustrate the concept of Celia's objectified role when he threatens to not only reduce her to an actual corpse, but to then use that corpse as a public trophy to his authority:

Nay, stay, hear this; let me not prosper, whore,  
But I will make thee an anatomy,  
Dissect thee mine own self, and read a lecture  
Upon thee, to the city, and in public

(2.5.69-72).

In these terms it is possible to identify Celia with the role of the farcical body as in *Loot*, the inanimate body in the form of Mrs McLeavy provides a focus for moral outrage from the audience, and moral outrageousness from the character of McLeavy:

McLeavy: She's my wife. I can do what I like with her.  
Anything is legal with a corpse.

(p.261).

The living yet passive and unempowered Celia provides *Volpone* with a similar focus, with the emphasis on rape rather than *Loot*'s disrespect for the rites of death. When Celia is refashioned as the inactive object of desire, not as a person but as a commodity, through the black farce of *Loot*, her innocence and passivity, which has been the read as the "counter balance" to the play's immoral characters, becomes the actual catalyst for much of the action. Her submissive inaction, like the corpse in *Loot* renders her the perfect "object" on which the villains may practice their art.



# Comedy and Justice



In conjunction with *Volpone* as a black farce, stands the relationship between the laws of comedy to the laws of justice. The Prologue to *Volpone* highlights

Jonson's emphasis on witty comedy:

Nor made he his play, for jests, stol'n from each table,  
But makes jests, to fit his fable.  
And, so presents quick comedy, refined,  
As best critics have designed;

(1.24-30).

These comments can be seen to "be stirred by the degradation into which the glorious name of poetry had fallen, as by the rampancy of vice".<sup>48</sup> However, Andrew Gurr's remark that *Volpone* deals with: "crimes more than follies"<sup>49</sup> is a view that is supported by the seemingly disastrous climax for Volpone and suggests that "quick comedy refined" may not have been the sole intention in *Volpone*. Jonson himself realised the departure *Volpone* made from "the strict rigour of comick law" in his epistle to Oxford and Cambridge,<sup>50</sup> and his claims that: "my special aim being to put the snaffle in their mouths that cry out, we never punish vice in our interludes"<sup>51</sup> has been usually read as a reference to the Puritan tirades against the theatre.

The character of Volpone is first seen in the play surrounded by images of gold, and in an overt display of justice, ends incarcerated by images of iron:

Thou art to lie in prison, cramped with irons,  
Till thou be'st sick, and lame indeed

(5.12.123-124).

The opulence, light and movement of the earlier scenes transforms to reveal only poverty, darkness and immobility, which reinforces an emphasis on Volpone's punishment and leads us to perhaps ask if indeed, Volpone is deserving of what

amounts to, a death sentence. It might appear that Volpone's punishment is severe because he is a gentleman, his rank and birth rendering him more accountable for his actions:

Thou, Volpone,  
By blood, and rank a gentleman, canst not fall  
Under like censure, but our judgement on thee  
Is, that thy substance be straight confiscate  
To the hospital, of the *Incurabili*

(5.12.116-120).

Volpone has ridiculed the authority of the court and he is sentenced for the breach of his elevated and trusted position among the privileged of Venetian society. The authority figures in *Volpone* wield their power with absolute adherence to the status quo which advances and upholds their positions - the judgement on Volpone is severe, not because of the nature of his "crime", but rather because he has transgressed the boundary which society imposes and in doing so has derided the dignity of the court. The closest Volpone comes to committing a real crime is in his attempted rape of Celia, but this never eventuates, and it has been Corvino's greed that has sanctioned the attempt. If Volpone's sentence is merely for the impersonation of a *Commendatore* then his punishment is indeed severe. It appears that Volpone is punished for his personal ambition, and primarily for duping important dignitaries. Volpone is punished for his moral standing, rather than by the breach of any written law, moreover, the mercenary attitude of the avvocatori and their lack of moral fibre, is certainly more destructive than Volpone's games of trickery and deception, as is suggested by Corbaccio's remark comparing the callousness of doctors with the capriciousness of magistrates:

It is true, they kill,  
With as much licence as a judge

(1.4.32-33)

In the last scenes five sentences are passed, with Volpone's the most severe. Voltore, who can be seen to have committed the only illegal act, the breach of his code of conduct as an avocatore, appears to be the least punished in the loss of his professional status, while the hero, Volpone, is sentenced to a lingering death. If Jonson is to be taken seriously in his claim to punish vices in *Volpone*, then Voltore is the more deserving candidate, and the severe sentence passed down on Volpone appears inconsistent with comedy.

The issues of comedy and justice have a particular relevance to *Loot* as it would appear from merely a casual reading of the play that the two are antithetical, the basis of the humour being centred on the reversal of accepted concepts of justice. However, it is the very conception of a 'normalised' system that is being challenged in *Loot*. The character of McLeavy is the only true innocent in the play; however, innocence equates with stupidity in a world where clever deception is rewarded. In *Loot*, ambition, bravado and cunning are the desired attributes, relegating lawfulness to a punishable status and McLeavy's unquestionable belief in the system is presented as ridiculous and naive rather than commendable:

Oh, we can rely on public servants to behave themselves. We must give this man every opportunity to do his duty. As a good citizen, I ignore the stories which bring officialdom into disrepute

(p.217).

Thus, the laws of comedy triumph over the laws of justice as McLeavy condemns himself by his own blind subservience to a corrupt system and the law, faced with an emphatic concentration of illegal deeds concedes to becoming part of the problem, as

opposed to the antidote to it. The sacrifice of fair play and honesty to the advantage of avarice and corruption is crucial to the success of the comic action, and characters with merely a perceived righteousness to protect them, become forfeit to the laws of comedy. McLeavy, although innocent, is charged with an indefinable crime, and insult is added to injury with the acknowledgement that, even in the face of adversity, he still believes in the system that has unfairly condemned him:

McLeavy: What am I charged with?  
Truscott: That needn't concern you for the moment. We'll fill in the details later.  
McLeavy: You can't do this. I've always been a law abiding citizen. The police are for the protection of ordinary people.  
Truscott: I don't know where you pick up these slogans, sir. You must read them on hoardings  
(p.273-274).

McLeavy becomes the scapegoat for the other character's crimes, and his punishment reflects the division made in the play not between "good" and "bad" but rather between the adroit and the clumsy.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to the character of McLeavy, Inspector Truscott appears as the embodiment of corruption in authority. His impersonation of a man from the water board, is a demotion from his actual status as a police inspector, and yet illogically, his power is increased by it enabling him to cloak his abuse of his trusted position:

Fay: It's common knowledge what police procedure is. They must have a search warrant.  
Truscott: I'm sure the police must, but as I've already informed you, I am from the water board. And our procedure is different

(p.228-229).

The corrupt Truscott is pertinent as a vehicle for the laws of comedy to excel over the laws of justice, while also commenting on a society that Orton appeared eager to ridicule. The irreverence shown towards this authority figure emerges as the epitome of frustration at the inequality and double standards inherent in the British social system. Restrictions on artistic freedom were manifest for Orton, in a lack of personal liberty, when in 1962 he was imprisoned for six months for defacing library books and this experience, he later recalled, only served to hone his comic skills and foster a scathing and acutely accurate ability to probe the tender parts of British hypocrisy. Orton found a focus for his anger and a new detachment in his writing,<sup>53</sup> the spell in prison redefining his writing and giving him the impetus that swung the balance of his vision towards comedy at the expense of justice. Orton himself stated:

“Before I had been vaguely conscious of something rotten somewhere; prison crystallised this. The old whore society lifted up her skirts and the stench was pretty foul”.<sup>54</sup>

*Loot*'s characters are reflections of this hypocrisy and corruption, and their weapon is the laughter turned back on itself by the audience's acceptance and enjoyment of the play, which has been summed up by John Lahr:

Orton's plays often scandalised audiences, but his wit made the outrage memorable. Orton's laughter bore out Nietzsche's dictum that: he who writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read, he wants to be learned by heart'.<sup>55</sup>

Inspector Truscott typifies the corrupt authority of a system that supports individual advancement at the expense of the general good. His manipulation of the law to his own advantage, is corruption revealed in the very structure of the society. As the authority figure in *Loot* he has a power that springs from an inherently flawed

set of rules; the absurdity of this was brought home to the public in *Loot* by fashioning the character of Truscott from a recognisable mould. In 1963 many of the London public would have followed the escapades of one Sergeant Harold

Challenor:

Detective Harold Challenor seemed the very model of a dedicated British bobby... The new crime fighting methods he advocated consisted essentially of planting evidence on his suspects. In 1963 he picked out a demonstrator during a visit by the Greek royal family and arrested him with the precious line 'You're fucking nicked my old beauty'. The suspect said that he was beaten up seven times on the way to the police station. <sup>56</sup>

The infamous figure of Challenor gave Orton the opportunity to place corruption where he had originally found it, at the doorstep of his audience. Inspector Truscott echoes Challenor's well quoted lines while arresting the innocent McLeavy, in *Loot*:

You're fucking nicked, my old beauty. You've found to your cost that the standards of the British police force are as high as ever

(p.273).

The parody of Challenor in the character of Truscott serves to highlight the priority accorded comedy at the expense of justice. The overt bigotry of the real policeman, when translated to the stage, acutely conveys justice in comic terms, while the famous line supplied Orton with a tool of recognisable familiarity. Orton stated in a BBC interview in 1964: "I think you should use the language of your age, and use every bit of it, not just a little bit".<sup>57</sup> The infamous line from an infamous policeman, furnishes the character of Truscott with a favourable advantage in the comic stakes, making him even more likely to overcome justice in the end, as

McLeavy, although aware of the cracks in the system, does not have the power to change it:

I know we're living in a country whose respect for the law is proverbial: who'd give power of arrest to the traffic lights if three women magistrates and a Liberal M.P. would only suggest it...

(p248).

The power of Truscott is an institutionalised power, and therefore is seen by the law abiding McLeavy to be unchallengable. Truscott's corruptibility is sanctioned when a pact is made at the end of *Loot*, securing the stolen money for a share out between all the characters. McLeavy's protests go unheeded as Truscott, in a remark that implies a new dimension to the play's structure, brings the audience into further collusion with the criminal acts on the stage:

Now then, sir, be reasonable. What has just taken place is perfectly scandalous and had better not go further than these three walls

(p.271).

Truscott's remark opens up a whole new aspect to the comedy/ justice question. By mentioning the three walls, Truscott engages the audience's complicity with the villains and against the righteous protests of McLeavy by bringing the whole theatre area on to the stage. The audience is drawn into the action, becoming partners in crime and finally abandoning McLeavy, who has lost any sympathy he may have originally had from the audience. With this one line justice is subverted twice, once on the stage itself as the culmination of the plot, and once, arguably more importantly for Orton's claims as a moralist, in the stalls. Albert Hunt comments:



“Orton has used a familiar set of theatre conventions- the murder, the body, the clues by which an infallible detective brings a criminal to justice- gleefully to demolish the social and moral conventions on which the play conventions are based”.<sup>58</sup> The audience has been completely seduced by a combination of comedy and their own natural instinct for survival. The moral outcome, parading justice as triumphant, is overturned, in favour of comedy.

In *Volpone* questions of comedy and justice appear to be well defined as issues within which characters have specific allegiances. William Empson comments:

Jonson had a theory about plays, that they ought to make you sick of being wicked, and the reason why his plays are so good is that they make you sick. They are written in poetry which is meant to excite contempt and nausea, and that is why it is such good poetry. Good people enjoy these plays very much, though they are in pain all the time, aching for the tortures to begin.<sup>59</sup>

We can see in Empson’s opinion of Jonson’s work, and in *Volpone* especially, the same claim to moralism that Orton made about his own work. The severity of the moral didacticism is just as acute in *Volpone* as in *Loot*, when scrutinised with an eye to the disrespect for institutionalised authority and impatient dismissal of characters created as gullible and automated drones. The underlying sentiments of rebellious social anarchy would seem to be more at home in a serious drama, but with understanding of the blurring of usual demarcation lines between justice and comedy in *Loot*, we can perhaps detect a similar effect in the treatment of comedy and

justice issues in *Volpone*. The audience that is “waiting for the tortures to begin” is an integral part of a successful relationship between comedy and justice.

A recent review of a production of *Volpone* at The Olivier Theatre, London, makes the point of emphasising the importance of audience collusion, especially in order to develop the negation of justice to comedy in the play, by pointing out the omission of any such audience participation:

Matthew Warchus's production of *Volpone* omits an element crucial to all Jonson's plays: the audience... Warchus's production, rather than challenging all these selfish desires and flawed perceptions, as Jonson's text does, compels us to arrive at a facile judgement which was spelt out in the opening minutes. There is little sense of the play's elaborately self-referential theatricality.<sup>60</sup>

The character of Mosca offers an insight into the way in which this aspect of theatricality is important in assessing the relationship between comedy and justice in *Volpone*. His soliloquy at the opening of the third act forges a relationship with the audience which is intimate and conspiratorial. Full of confidence, Mosca brags about his expertise as a parasite, delighting in his recent success and tempting the audience to share in it with him, and his view of the world, is one in which, in the light of the total action of the play, is not entirely absurd.<sup>61</sup> The soliloquy has the same purpose as Truscott's remark on the three walls in *Loot*, as Mosca is in both the fictional world of the play but also addressing the audience:

But your fine elegant, rascal, that can rise,  
And stoop, almost together, like an arrow,  
Shoot through the air, as nimbly as a star,  
Turn short, as does a swallow, and be here,  
And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;  
Present to any humour, all occasion;  
And change a visor, swifter, than a thought

(3.2.23-29).

Mosca's remarks on his agility take on a new dimension when he refers to how he can be everywhere at once. Through this direct address, Mosca can move freely as both fictional character and audience co-conspirator, uniting both in a single ethical space. In doing this Mosca not only bridges the ontological gap between fiction and audience but also creates an opening in which the audience may depart from their usual moral allegiance with justice and defect to the side of comedy for the duration of the performance. By the action of his soliloquy, Mosca enlists the audience to his moral realm and as Rayner comments: "A fundamental convention in comedy is the frank acknowledgement of the audience and the open complicity between the imaginary world and the real one".<sup>62</sup>

By bringing the audience into the realm of the imaginary world, a relationship is created giving Mosca the license to turn potentially bad behaviour into funny behaviour. John Sweeney suggests that Jonson, at this time, may have shared with his character of Volpone: "an interest in the theatre as a place to manipulate foolish and ignorant spectators".<sup>63</sup> This opinion can be of further use in defining Mosca's purpose, when compared to Truscott's observation on the sanctity of the "three walls". Mosca, then, is not only manipulating the audience, but doing it with a definite aim of shifting the boundaries of what is morally and socially acceptable. He is contributing his part to the redefinition of comedy in *Volpone* by seducing the audience into a partnership with him, and therefore at this point of the play, with Volpone also.

The innocence of Celia and Bonario would seem to be juxtaposed with the calculating avarice of the legacy hunters, the thespian inventiveness of Volpone and the cunning dexterity of his servant, Mosca. Celia and Bonario's personal values of truth and piety are not however totally commendable traits as although they are vindicated at the close of *Volpone* they are made to suffer humiliation on a scale equal to the sentencing of, at least, Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore. Celia's virtue has been made suspect by her own husband, while Bonario has the stigma of having been disinherited by his father. Celia and Bonario have much of the character of McLeavy in them, their naiveté can be used to indicate that we do not have to accept their tolerant meekness, but admit that a part of us finds their obsequiousness rather irritating and utterly ridiculous. Bonario is effectively trivialised and made impotent by his unintentionally comic attempts at heroism:

Forbear, foul ravisher, libidinous swine,  
Free the forced lady, or thou diest, impostor  
(3.7.267-268).

This attempt at chivalry by Bonario is difficult to take seriously because the use of alliteration fabricates a sense of ludicrous pomposity. By following directly after Volpone's elaborate and eloquent speeches to Celia, the emphasis is placed on Volpone's dexterity and Bonario's mundanity. Although the plot presents Volpone as the transgressor of normal moral values, Bonario's integrity is portrayed as excessive and priggishly stupid.

The dénouement of *Volpone* presents a bleak picture often thought to be incompatible with comedy. Gabrielle Bernhard Jackson has this to say on *Volpone*'s ending: " In *Volpone* the heavenly illumination does finally penetrate society and its

judgement: man's animal elements are rejected, his spiritual worth reaffirmed", <sup>64</sup> but this view rejects or completely ignores the implications of the Epilogue to *Volpone*. I suggest that the Epilogue can offer an alternative ending that can be aligned with the bleakly pragmatic outlook of Orton's *Loot*.

In *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* the word Epilogue is not listed, while in *The Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* <sup>65</sup> it is defined as: "a speech or short poem addressed to the spectators by one of the actors after the play is over". *The Oxford Companion to English Language* is more useful and offers an insight into an alternative purpose to *Volpone*'s Epilogue: "The concluding part of a literary work, often serving to knit up loose ends in the plot or provide information about later events". <sup>66</sup> The Quarto and Folio editions of *Volpone* do not indicate the last six lines of the play as an epilogue as in other Jonson plays such as *Epicoene*, although they are indented in the 1616 Folio. <sup>67</sup> The use of rhyming couplets could also be seen as an indication of difference, and therefore serving as an epilogue, however *Volpone* is a play, meant not to be merely read, but performed upon the Jacobean stage and considerations such as indentations and rhyming couplets are mainly for readers, not actors. From this it is possible to propose that *Volpone*'s last six lines are not an Epilogue at all, indeed the O.E.D. definition, that it is addressed to the spectators appears to be correct, and yet when *Volpone* is looked at with the laws of comedy in a commanding position, the words "after the play is over" do not seem appropriate.

If we can allow that *Loot* can offer a view of *Volpone*, which although has been glimpsed before, can now be more deeply scrutinised, the epilogue must be aligned more with *The Oxford Companion to English Language* definition which

sees it as a concluding part, rather than an addition, which if cleverly constructed can completely overturn the play's denouement.

The epilogue can, in a sense, be seen as *Volpone*'s soliloquy, akin to Mosca's in the third act, as both invite audience collusion in order to strengthen their positions. When looking at the conspiratorial nature of Truscott's "three walls" remark from *Loot*, spoken presumably from a proscenium arch stage, we have the essence, often lost in modern "boxed set" theatre settings of the realist tradition, of Jacobean drama.

The conventions of Jacobean theatre such as the open platform stage, where an actor was almost surrounded by the audience, invites a more reciprocal relationship than the proscenium arch setting. The audience is encouraged by the epilogue to *Volpone* to comply with the laws of comedy and overturn the avocatori's decision, thereby reinstating Volpone and assuring the plays compatibility with comedy. In this sense the epilogue is not so much an ending, but a beginning, offering the audience the power to dictate Volpone's fate and hence to determine the whole focus of the play. What has appeared as a severe sentence and a bleak ending incompatible with comedy, is in fact overturned in the ultimate farcical unmasking in *Volpone*, as justice acquiesces and Volpone, in full conspiracy with the audience, is pardoned.

In this thesis I have attempted to discover how far Jonson's *Volpone* can be reinvented when examined through Joe Orton's *Loot*. As Terence Hawkes comments:

A text is surely better served if it is perceived not as the embodiment of some frozen, definite significance, but as a kind of intersection or confluence which is continually traversed, a no man's land, an arena, in which different and opposed readings urged from different and opposed political positions compete in history for ideological power: the power, that is, to determine cultural meaning- to say what the world is and should be like .<sup>68</sup>

Through focusing on texts from the ancients such as Lucian, Renaissance men such as Erasmus and modern day farceurs such as Chaplin, I have hoped to go some way toward showing that *Volpone* is not an isolated text, with definitive and historically specific meanings. With the contribution made by *Loot* to the form of farce, *Volpone* can be reopened to meanings and interpretations not readily apparent before Orton's creation of "black farce", and indeed, to support the claim for the challenge of "New Plays for Old".

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