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Uncanny Resemblance: Unmasking the Characters of *Volpone*

Ben Jonson's *Volpone* evokes a popular tradition of *commedia dell'arte*—a form of professional theater popular across Europe, marked by stock characters dressed in recognizable masks. The only performers who do not wear masks within this theatrical school are typically the *Innamorati*, the two lovers at the center of the plot. Though Jonson doesn't confine himself to the realm of *commedia* (*Volpone* was likely performed without masks), considering *Volpone* within this framework, one might expect the performance to be staged with Celia and Bonario as the only unmasked characters. However, defying these conventions—namely unmasking Volpone and Mosca—benefits the play's presentation without betraying its allusions to *commedia dell'arte*; it nods in the direction of the play's preoccupation with fluid identities and intimates a covert romance between Volpone and Mosca in the process.

*Volpone*'s fascination with the act of transformation—its confusion, its deception, and even its execution—is apparent from the very start. The plot revolves around trickery in terms of not only convincing the cast of characters to contribute to Volpone's wealth, but also mistaking identities, altering appearances, and shifting statuses. In only the second scene, Volpone witnesses a performance by his hermaphrodite, Androgyno, alongside Nano, the dwarf, and Castrone, the eunuch. The entertainment revolves around Androgyno's own journey across gender, religion, and even species (1.2.1-63). It is a meta-performance that sets up the audience to spot moments of conversion—instances that a mask can only do so much to capture. Though it

might be capable of signaling ambiguity, as in the case of a hermaphrodite like Androgyno or a eunuch like Castrone, a mask's ability to be modified or replaced throughout the play creates a practical and logistical nightmare for actors and audience alike, especially in the cases of Volpone and Mosca. The scene under Celia's window, where Volpone disguises himself as a mountebank and Mosca the mountebank's assistant, immediately comes to mind as one requiring a second set of masks (2.2-3); Volpone's *commendatori* impression to taunt his cheated victims after feigning death would likewise involve "face-swapping" (5.4). One might even add Mosca's promotion to *clarissimo* upon inheriting Volpone's wealth—Volpone's line's, "Straight take my habit of *clarissimo* / And walk the streets; be seen, torment 'em more," would be accompanied by him taking off his own mask (alongside his cloak) and handing it over to Mosca, creating a ghostly likeness of himself to haunt the others (5.3.105-106). Thus, performers would need to carry around and substitute masks often, perhaps inconspicuously at times. The difficulty only compounds when one takes into consideration *commedia dell'arte*'s origin as a form of street theater (though once again, Jonson does not intend for his play to fit strictly within those confines). At the same time, the audience must keep track of the shifting characters, reacquainting with new masks on every occasion. That is as if the task of familiarizing oneself with the cast isn't daunting enough at the start of a play, whether being read or watched.

Adding onto the difficulties of masking Volpone and Mosca would be handling timely, visible adjustments. The limits imposed by masks on facial expressions are obvious, but it is more important to consider that Mosca repeatedly applies ointment to Volpone's eyes to give the impression of age and illness (e.g. 1.2.116, 1.4.162). Whereas this makes sense to act out on a real face, the situation becomes more complex with the introduction of masks. Quite literally, things could get messy. However, that is not to say that getting rid of Volpone and Mosca's

masks would be compromising or settling in any way. Though masks might not be apt for cosmetic treatments during the play, the makeup applied to Volpone serves as a figurative and literal mask in itself, doubling atop the performer's previously prepared stage makeup.

Jonson seems to compensate for the exclusion of masks in another way as well—since the characters are introduced, their names provide them with a full costume, Volpone meaning “fox” and Mosca, “fly” or “parasite.” It must be said that most of the other characters also share these same symbolic masks, with the exceptions of Celia, Bonario, and Peregrine. Almost all relate to animals (Corvino twice so, as he becomes a horned cuckold in addition to a “crow;” Nano, the “dwarf;” Androgyno, the “hermaphrodite;” Castrone, the “eunuch” or “castrate;” have names that can be applied to livestock or various beasts; though Sir and Lady Would-be don't have beastly names, their names are emblematic just the same). This commonality may seem to oppose the suggestion that Volpone and Mosca should carry special significance through their unmasking, but that is not the case. These nominal get-ups serve to place Volpone and Mosca in a class of their own. On one hand, they exist in the same realm as the other cunning characters, in terms of figurative names. Celia, Bonario, and Peregrine, having neutral names, are thus separated as images of honesty and integrity. On the other hand, by unmasking Volpone and Mosca, they appear as protagonists, on the same plane as the unmasked *Innamorati*, Celia and Bonario (Peregrine exists in some middle ground as a side character and not an *inamorato*; he may be masked when he impersonates a merchant to gain revenge on Politic, but even then his deception is warranted unlike the rest of the cast; 5.4.1-80).

As it turns out, unmasking Mosca and Volpone is essential to their appearance as “the good guys.” Despite witnessing all of their malicious mischief, the spectator cannot help but cheer the two criminals on, to sympathize and empathize with them, but also to associate with

them, becoming accomplices in the process (paying to watch [or read] may be considered supporting them in a sense). Unmasking Volpone and Mosca makes them even more relatable to the unmasked audience. Looking out onto the stage, the audience is directed to see itself in the pair. The connection is no coincidence; it is drawn out even before the play starts. The Prologue ends with a witty comment on how the author will change the spectator's image: with the "the little salt [(a metaphor for satiric wit) that] remaineth [from his pen] ... he'll rub your cheeks, till, red with laughter, ... They shall look fresh a week after" (34-36). The description evokes the application of blush or some other form of makeup to liven one's image and add a false, yet convincing, sense of youth; it is not unlike the events which follow, when Mosca (in this case the author/playwright) applies ointment to Volpone's (or the observer's) eyes. All of this priming ensures that one's allegiance never crosses over to Celia or Bonario as they stand on trial (5.10,12). If there is any confusion, it is whether one wants Volpone or Mosca to come out on top after the latter unveils his plans to betray his master (5.5.6-9). Sure, they aren't as blameless as the *Innamorati*, who are typically pitted against an inferior world (Celia and Bonario are much more worthy of that title here)—but they might as well be.

It is in this context that staging *Volpone* as more of a *commedia*, with Volpone and Mosca both unmasked, reveals perhaps its greatest potential. Presenting the two in the same way that *Innamorati* would typically be shown allows for an untraditional reading of the couple as lovers. The hints at some kind of romance are certainly littered throughout. From the start, Mosca's power and position are unusual: despite his status as a servant, Mosca comes off as Volpone's equal throughout, even rising at times to the role of the master. Mosca is free to venture where he pleases as Mosca stays "bed-ridden" at home, following the lead of his servant. Mosca is clearly the more intelligent of the two, but there is more to it. One might liken the odd

dynamic to that of a woman playing hard-to-get, leading someone on, or pursuing a romantic relationship only for monetary gain. Not only is the male lover, with his higher social standing (due to gender), placing himself at the feet of his beloved, but the female lover is also taking advantage of him. This perspective explains many of the oddities of the pair's relationship and the play's plot. Mosca's clear denial of his master is unexpected at times, both in the context of what Volpone requests and how quickly Mosca denies him. Taking the two as lovers, specifically as Volpone chasing after Mosca, it makes more sense when Volpone, in his appreciation for Mosca's antics, asks: "Come hither, let me kiss thee" (1.4 78) and Mosca quickly brushes him aside, "Keep you still (1.4 79). The most Volpone ever gets from his servant is a performance, meant to keep him on the line. After being entertained by Androgyno, Nano, and Castrone in the opening act, Volpone asks, "Now, very, very pretty! Mosca, this / Was thy invention?" (1.2.63-64); "If it please my patron, / Not else," Mosca replies (1.2.65-66), faking humility or sheepishness (as one might actually act in front of a lover) and avoiding answering the question, both the apparent and the hidden (whether he feels the same way about Volpone). It is a case of unrecognized (on the part of both characters, and potentially the audience) and unrequited love. Masks might not be able to change how the romance plays out, but it could help ensure it isn't completely missed.

Taking it a step further, casting the actor playing the unmasked Mosca to look like that playing the unmasked Celia would complete the narrative, cementing Mosca as an object of desire. After all, Volpone falls in love with Celia on account of Mosca's description, as he watches and listens to his servant express her beauty (1.5.107-114). If Mosca matches the appearance he describes, the irony would not be lost on the audience. It would be similar to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, where the beloved falls in love with the lover's messenger who

merely delivers the messages of love. Mosca is simultaneously the beloved and cupid himself. He is desire and ambition, shaping Volpone's aspiration for wealth. Volpone is all too content with what he has. It is only upon Mosca's mention and his insistence that Volpone attains or even seeks his treasures—bringing up Celia's beauty (2.5), refusing to get rid of the annoyance that is Lady Would-Be, instead keeping her for gifts (even when Volpone says it is worth paying to get rid of her; 3.4). It as though looking at Mosca is what spurs this longing. Not only is Mosca Volpone's servant, but he is also his dearest friend, his sole heir, his only son; most importantly he is his secret love (secret even to Volpone himself). It is significant that when Volpone is stuck at home all he really sees is Mosca. There are of course a few others—the dwarf, the eunuch, and the hermaphrodite—but these are desexualized by nature. Whenever any of his guests visit, Volpone turns blind, stuck in his bed without the capacity to move or desire or look or hear. Each time his guests visit and he “wakes,” he opens his eyes to see Mosca beside him on his bed. Celia is the main exception to this, but casting the two in each other's likeness adds an even more fascinating thread to unravel, how Volpone's love is merely subverted and embodied in Celia. Without unmasking Volpone and Mosca, all the audience has to realize this are Freudian slips: the aforementioned request for a kiss and, later on, Volpone's fantasy that “Let me embrace thee! [*He hugs MOSCA*] Oh, that I could now / Transform thee to a Venus!” for his sexual use as the side-note implies (1073).

The choice to expose Volpone and Mosca's faces, casting Mosca's actor to resemble Celia's, renders much of *Volpone's* underlying mayhem clearer, more relatable, and more multidimensional. Quite ironically, unmasking characters like Mosca adds to the elements of guise and disguise. Though masks certainly embody an aura of duplicity that would be appropriate for the play, their static nature would detract from their ability to capture the

intricacy and plurality of some characters' transformations. This is not to mention that the sly connotation of masks is a more modern association that would not have been present at a time when they were much more commonly used in theater, so it wouldn't add much in that sense. Instead, building on Jonson's allusions to *commedia* throughout the play, and taking some freedoms within that framework, allows for the creation of more engaging subplots while also helping the viewer to follow them.

Works Cited

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