

Characters in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*

Note: you do not need to have read *Volpone* before attempting this exercise.

1. Look at the list of *dramatis personae* ('persons of the drama') which prefaces the play:

Volpone, a Magnifico

Mosca, his Parasite

Voltore, an Advocate

Corbaccio, an old Gentleman

Corvino, a Merchant

Bonario, son to Corbaccio

Sir Politick Would-Be, a Knight

Peregrine, a Gentleman Traveller

Nano, a Dwarf

Castrone, an Eunuch

Androgyno, an Hermaphrodite

Grege (or Mob)

Commandadori, Officers of Justice

Mercatori, three Merchants

Avocatori, four Magistrates

Notario, the Register

Lady Would-Be, Sir Politick's Wife

Celia, Corvino's Wife

Servitori, Servants, two Waiting-women, etc.

2. What information is given and what expectations of character are created by the very names Jonson assigns them? Write your responses below:

Volpone , a Magnifico	
Mosca , his Parasite	
Voltore , an Advocate	
Corbaccio , an old Gentleman	
Corvino , a Merchant	

Bonario , son to Corbaccio	
Sir Politick Would-Be , a Knight	
Peregrine , a Gentleman Traveller	
Nano , a Dwarf	
Castrone , an Eunuch	
Androgyno , an Hermaphrodite	
Grege (or Mob)	
Commandadori , Officers of Justice	
Mercatori , three Merchants	
Avocatori , four Magistrates	
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Lady Would-Be , Sir Politick's Wife	
Celia , Corvino's Wife	
Servitori , Servants, two Waiting-women, etc.	

Feedback

The first indication of the play's setting and atmosphere is the Italian nature of the names. Italy was the home of the Renaissance but also, by this time, of notorious Machiavellian politics and of banking and commerce; as trade competitors, Venetians roused resentment and prejudice among the Jacobean audience. Today, such names rather connote the warmth and romance of Mediterranean culture. Basically, the names are like labels indicating explicit personalities and character types. Individuals are identified with extremely frank epithets: 'parasite', 'eunuch', 'hermaphrodite' (check the meaning of these terms if you are unfamiliar with them). They are not neutral, nor complimentary as applied at this time. The odd names might suggest jocularly, but also hint at notorious perversions and vices.

The main characters' names also make clear the bestial qualities of human beings with which the play will be concerned: Voltore, Volpone, Mosca, Corbaccio, Corvino (check the meanings of these words in Italian). Associated traits were well-known from Aesopic and Reynardian fable traditions. Consider the full range of initial impressions that a study of the names reveals. It gives clear insight into Jonson's practice as a dramatist, concerned with exposing 'typical' vices and anatomising human nature according to such theories as the 'humours' (which held that people were divided into four types: sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic). Look these terms up in a dictionary or online if they are unfamiliar to you.

Thinking about next steps? Save any work you do here in case it is useful to you when the course begins – your tutor, for instance, might invite you to discuss your experience of the taster activity.