

## ***Volpone – Animal and Moral Monstrosity***

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**Abstract:** *This essay examines the ways in which the concepts of monstrosity and the monstrous are dealt with throughout the dramatic interaction in Ben Jonson's Volpone. Whereas, on a first reading of the play, monstrosity and the monstrous are perceived as notions which relay to matters of animal-like physicality, of mere grotesque appearance, it is really the ethical ambivalence of its characters that formulates the suggestion that monstrosity essentially bears upon moral corruption. Greed, lust, dishonesty, jealousy are vices which relate to an understanding of the monstrous and monstrosity congruent to the Renaissance view upon these notions as a matter of psychological and moral deformity rather than a non-figurative medieval perspective upon the concepts. As a result, in Ben Jonson's Volpone, animal imagery conveying altered animal-like features merely represents an element of comedy which serves as an amusement trigger, in order to entertain the audience and achieve dramatic jesting, while moral monstrosity is actually a form of challenging the social notions of physical monstrosity of the period by opposing the monstrosity of the mind through monstrous exaggerations of the body. The human-like mental monstrosity is enhanced through animal-like features of the characters and their symbolic names. The beast imagery is wisely exploited with the intention of creating an evocative reflection of a lustful Venice and its felonious, immoral inhabitants. The motif of the medieval bestiary is accordingly employed by assigning beast-like features to almost every character who adopts the corresponding behaviour of the animal that gives its name: Volpone, the sharp-witted fox, a depraved hedonist; Mosca, the deceiving, unscrupulous parasite; and the three legacy-hunters, Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino—the insatiable greed-driven prey birds. The end of Jonson's comedy unfolds in a moralistic manner, where Volpone and the other legacy-hunters' mischievous nature is finally penalized. Their animal-like depictions—avarice, the continuous illicit chase for fast and easy money—generate the evil nature of the dramatic figures, which epitomize moral monstrosity.*

**Keywords:** *Ben Jonson, early modern drama, grotesque body, medieval bestiaries, monstrosity, Volpone*