VENICE AND THE CITY OF LONDON: PLACES OF MEMORY IN BEN JONSON'S *VOLPONE, OR THE FOX*

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Abstract: *This essay uses Pierre Nora's influential concept of "lieux de mémoire" (7) and narrows its scope to the place-consciousness derived from dramatic representations of places of the city (Venice and the City of London) in Ben Jonson's city comedy* Volpone, or the Fox *(1605-1606). I provide reflections on—and nuances of—nostalgia, in a way that largely discusses the less precise paradoxes and ambivalences that the concept potentially entails in relation to urban environments and places related to early modern drama. I argue that the cosmopolitan city of Venice in Ben Jonson's play—with its commercial environment, the Senate and the judicial system—is a locus of commercial and historical memory, identified with the city of London in the minds of the Jacobean audience. Moreover, urban environments in Jacobean city comedy (the marketplace, the exchange, public squares and, ultimately, the theatre) dramatize a specific place-consciousness that displaces the emotion of rural nostalgia, replacing it with the cultural memory of commercial encounters—whether in early modern Venice or London.*

Keywords: *early modern theatre*; *place of memory*; *London*; *Venice*; Volpone.

Sites of memory in early modern drama are explored through themes of remembering and forgetting and cultural geography. Jacobean playwrights frequently engage with memory as a dramatic device, shaping characters' identities and historical narratives in relation to the places they traverse during dramatic action. In examining how memory functions in early modern theatre, it is important to consider the intersections with emotion, space, and historiography. For example, characters in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* enact relations with places of memory in the city (early modern Venice or, by extrapolation, London) through performance, language, and emotional resonance. As French historian Pierre Nora observes, "There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (Nora 7) in modern societies, such as peasant culture (as opposed to democratization and mass culture in urban environments), which leads to an "eradication of memory by history" (Nora 8). Considering the implications of places of memory in shaping collective and individual entities as dramatized in Jacobean city comedy, I argue that urban environments in the city of Venice (the senate and the system of justice, the *avocatori*)—in relation to private spaces (Volpone's house, his bedroom, the bed space)—epitomize a paradoxical place-consciousness that is neither Venetian nor specifically English, but which displaces the emotion of rural nostalgia, usually associated with human emotions, substituting it with places

of commercial encounters characteristic of early modern cities. Rather than insisting on nostalgic emotions such as love, friendship, or familial connections, the play dramatizes a pragmatic and even cynical world of commercial relations and deceit, in which sites of memory are depersonalized and devoid of emotional intensity.

Volpone's bedroom and bed, initially a place of pleasure and deceit, in which he performed his tactical procedure of ensnaring the greedy by pretending to be sick, soon becomes Volpone's would-be deathbed, a site of personal memory, in which another trick is enacted—that of the character's presumed death. The enacting of death itself in the private space of the bedroom and the bed accounts for another feature of the play's meta-theatricality. As Maggie Vinter observes, "The interactions between the individual and the common at Volpone's deathbed provide insight into Jonson's understanding of the commercial theater, another space that can be seen as a site either of value-generating communal endeavor or of individualistic artistic, authorial, or critical aspirations" (141-142). In this context, Volpone's deathbed becomes a place of performance, a (possibly) elevated stage where Volpone enacts the scene of his own death, while other characters attend the spectacle. Beside the audience in the play—assisting at what they believe to be Volpone's death—there is the theatre audience, who (like Mosca) are aware that this is just a spectacle to lure the gullible characters. In this way, Volpone seems to be dying theatrically for profit, on a stage that might bring him pecuniary benefit.

The theatre and the marketplace become significant sites of cultural memory in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*—whether these places are located in Venice or in early modern London. Jean-Christophe Agnew, in one of the most eloquent studies of the convergence of theatre and commercialism, entitled *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550*–1750 (1986), posited that these two realms (the theatre and the marketplace) emerged out of a similar, foreboding necessity: for both the new space of the playhouse and the new space-less-ness of "the market," "the customer's will to believe was a stipulated or conditional act, a matter less of faith than of suspended disbelief" (Agnew x). This "suspended disbelief," in Agnew's understanding, was part of the change in the English economic landscape of the period, where a growing consumer culture started to replace notions of morality. Gradually, the space of the theatre became a commercial space of performance, where the audience interacted in mercantile ways. As Brian Sheerin observes in "The Substance of Shadows: Imagination and Credit Culture in *Volpone*" (2013), when writing about the world of Ben Jonson's theatre, "As with the gulls in *Volpone*, the judgments of the audience emerge out of an interplay of seeing and being seen" (385). Indeed, the audience of London's city comedy enjoyed going to the theatre, and this activity was

similar to going to the marketplace, not necessarily to buy something (or to learn moral lessons from the theatre) but to see and be seen.

Ben Jonson's *Volpone* engages with sites of memory in intriguing ways, particularly through its themes of deception, performance, and legacy. The play constructs memory as a site of manipulation—Volpone feigns illness to shape how others remember him, while Mosca orchestrates a false narrative that alters perceptions of inheritance and trust. *Volpone* uses spatial and performative elements to reinforce sites of memory in the city of Venice, associated with the imaginary picture of the city of London. For instance, the bed-space in the play functions as a theatrical site where Volpone enacts his deception, shaping how others recall his supposed decline. Additionally, the play's engagement with themes of greed and legacy suggests that cultural memory is not just personal but it is deeply tied to social and economic structures.

The action in *Volpone* takes place in Volpone's bedroom, inside and outside Corvino's house, inside Sir Politic's lodging, in the Scrutineo, and in the street. *Volpone* is set in Venice, but rather than using the city as a mere backdrop, Jonson integrates its legal and social structures into the play's themes. Venice, known for its wealth, commerce, and complex judicial system, serves as a fitting setting for a story centred on deception and greed. Jonson was meticulous in his depiction of Venice, incorporating details about its governance and legal practices. The play references Venetian justice through the *avocatori*, who function as investigators and judges, reflecting the city's reputation for impartiality—or even corruption in certain cases.

In early modern city comedies, performed in London around the 1600s, key public spaces such as the marketplace, public squares, the theatre, the Exchange, and the streets serve as focal points of civic life, shaping the lives and decisions of their inhabitants. These spaces become arenas where playwrights manipulate settings to construct intricate plots primarily aimed at entertainment. However, beyond mere amusement, Jacobean playwrights create characters with exaggerated moral traits, who, regardless of their ethical standing, animate and master these spaces to achieve their goals. In doing so, these spaces become fluid, their consistency shifting according to the needs and purposes of the characters. For this reason, public and private spaces in Ben Jonson's *Volpone, or the Fox* are endowed with a kind of fluidity that transcends the real-life spaces they represent.

The judicial system appears to be corrupt—in a republican Venice where liberal democracy is supposed to prosper. Through the satirical critique of the judicial system, particularly through the depiction of the Venetian court, the play highlights corruption, manipulation, and the failure of justice, as seen in the actions of the avocatori (judges), who are easily deceived by Voltore, a cunning lawyer. Jonson uses the legal proceedings to expose how wealth and

rhetoric can distort truth, allowing the guilty to evade punishment while the innocent suffer. The avocatori (four Magistrates), modelled after Venice's *avocadori*,[1] serve as investigators and judges, but their reliance on testimony rather than thorough investigation leads to miscarriages of justice. The play suggests that systemic flaws, rather than individual incompetence, contribute to the failure of justice. Ultimately, Jonson critiques both Venetian and English legal systems, showing how power and greed undermine fairness.

While historical documents of the early modern period confirm the existence of theatres, public squares, markets, and exchanges in London or Venice, the way in which these settings are employed in city comedies shows a creative decision by playwrights. Ben Jonson, for instance, never visited Venice; yet he chose it as the setting for *Volpone*, relying on travellers' accounts to construct an imaginative urban landscape. The play's action oscillates between interior settings (Volpone's house and his bed[2]) and exterior locales (the public square, streets, and the Scrutineo—the Venetian law courts), creating a contrast between private and public spheres. However, as the play progresses, this spatial distinction becomes increasingly heterogeneous. For example, in the play, places are connected with animal imagery.[3] Characters referring to places and events that are supposed to have

[1] In early modern Venice, the three Avocadori del Comun were chosen by the senate. According to the *Lessico Veneto* (*Venetian Vocabulary*) by Fabio Mutinelli, the *Avogadori del Comun* exercised the public ministry in civil and criminal cases; they took care to preserve the laws, proceeding rigorously towards those who violated them; they decided to which courts to bring the trials; they opposed the promulgation of decrees contrary to the public good, nor were the resolutions of the Great Council and the Senate valid without their intervention; they acted as accusers against anyone who wanted to violate the established order (Mutinelli, 41; my translation). In Jonson's play, there are four avocatori, suggesting the play's difference from Venice's real-life setting.

[2] In "Seeing to Things in *Volpone*," Frances Nicol Teague analyses the use of emblems and fables in Ben Jonson's play, highlighting the role of wealth as a central theme through the symbolism of props and written documents. Among the props mentioned by Teague, the invalid's bed and the shrine of gold reinforce the themes of illness and greed. As Teague notes, "While the shrine for the worship of gold looms behind the action in Volpone's bedroom, another piece of stage furniture, the invalid's bed, quite literally, holds the center of the stage" (119). Indeed, the private spaces of the bed and the bedroom highlight the themes of greed and deception, but they are also a kind of stage where the play's theatrical events unfold.

[3] In "On comedy and death: the anamorphic ape in *Volpone*," Isaac Hui discusses the image of the ape as an anamorphic figure (as an image of distortion and deformity, constantly changing shape, as well as challenging the reader's perspective). As Hui observes, "Nano, in Volpone, also embodies the signification of the anamorphic ape, and its representation is ultimately related to Volpone's gold—so that while the gold gives a narcissistic completeness to a city subject, the force of death and castration, as embodied in the dwarf, is always present, challenging and making this illusion questionable" (141). From the perspective of my argument concerning the play's sites of memory, Nano and the figure of the dwarf can be interpreted as such a site of memory because the illusion of normality created by such a character reinforces the play's meta-theatricality.

occurred in London—such as "your lion's whelping in the Tower" (2.1.35)—suggest that Jonson's Venice is an imagined space populated with physical elements that resonate with his audience's reality in the city of London.

The above-mentioned scene between Sir Politic Would-Be (an English traveller to Venice) and Peregrine (another traveller abroad and a counterpoint to Sir Politic) takes place in a public square outside Corvino's house (SD 2.1.1). Sir Politic is a comic figure because he is gullible, and he tries so hard to give the appearance of being well-informed that he believes ridiculous fictions and fabricates absurd economic ventures. Peregrine considers Sir Politic a ridiculous figure, but he pretends to agree to the Englishman's fantastic stories just for his own amusement. The conversation between the two travellers is peppered with fantastic tales and animal imagery, and many other "prodigies" (2.1.36), such as "a raven, that should build / In a ship royal of the King's" (2.1.22-23); "The fires at Berwick! / And the new star!" (2.1.36-37); "meteors" (2.1.38); "three porpoises seen above the bridge" (2.1.40); "a whale discovered in the river / As high as Woolwich" (2.1.46-47), which is supposed to have been "Spaniola's whale" (2.1.51), sent from Spain as a spy; and other such incredible things, including the "lion's whelping in the Tower" (2.1.35). These fantastic stories about England's places of memory are narrated in Venice, by a ridiculous Englishman who pretends to be quite knowledgeable, and whose imagination is fuelled by another traveller (Peregrine), who thinks that "this knight, / Were he well-known, would be a precious thing / To fit our English stage" (2.1.56-58). The meta-theatricality of the scene cannot escape the attentive audience, as Volpone's Venice is a subtle paradigm for London's stage.

Venice, depicted as a remote and enigmatic locale in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, serves as a backdrop for a labyrinthine tale of greed and deception. These constructed spaces generate circles of power that interact and sometimes overlap. What transpires in one sphere influences another. Characters from various social strata are drawn into Volpone's circle of influence, which ultimately leads them to the supreme centre of power—the *Scrutineo*, or Senate House (3.2.55). The Venetian law courts represent the supreme space where justice and order must be upheld for the well-being of the citizens. By mapping the city of Venice, the play's narrative unfolds—a tale of avarice in which every action revolves around the pursuit of Volpone's wealth. All characters are ensnared in his web of deception, which, in turn, generates further circles of power and misfortune. Spatial dynamics dictates power shifts; within his private dwelling (his house and bedroom), Volpone reigns supreme, orchestrating elaborate schemes to manipulate the citizens of Venice.

However, once Volpone steps into public view, he becomes vulnerable, bound by the state's legal system, represented by the *Scrutineo*.

Volpone confesses this weakness to his servant Mosca: *"Here, 'twas good, in private, / But in public—"* (5.1.3-4), implying that, in public, things may not work as smoothly for the tricksters.[4] The transfer of power in *Volpone* is facilitated by movement between spaces. Volpone's ruse of feigning death is validated only when broadcast publicly, as he instructs Mosca and Nano, *"Straight gived out about the streets, you two, / That I am dead"* (5.1.60-61). Nevertheless, Volpone hides in the shadows, "Behind the curtain, on a stool, and hearken; / Sometime peep over, see how they do look" (5.1.84-85), as he enjoys the spectacle of greed. Moreover, Volpone intends to laugh at the gulls, saying "O, 'twill afford me a rare meal of laughter!" (5.1.87). This is another metatheatrical allusion, considering that highly placed members of the audience would sit on a stool on stage and enjoy the play—seeing and being seen at the same time and laughing at the comic scenes.

In city comedies, major events unfold in public spaces, where society exerts its influence. Whether enacting revenge, as when Mosca comments about Corvino: *"Look for him / Tomorrow morning with a rope and dagger / To visit all the streets"* (5.194-95); or when manipulating power structures, visibility is key. The streets are public spaces where Volpone feels less comfortable, because, in public, he has to obey the laws of Venice. Volpone delegates his deceptive prowess to Mosca, urging him to *"Straight take my habit of clarissimo, / And walk the streets; be seen, torment 'em more"* (5.1.104-105). Mosca's disguise is not only a metatheatrical figure[5] suggesting that the play's characters can adopt different masks, but it is also a sign that Volpone allocates authorial powers to his actors, just as the playwright speaks through the actors' voices. In this way, the stage space extends to comprehend not only the fictional world of Venice on stage (with its public streets and private interior spaces) but also London's streets, or any other city for that matter.

[4] In "The Progress of Trickster in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*," Don Beecher focuses on the tradition of the trickster figure in Jonson's comedy, represented by the fox metaphor. As Beecher observes, "The fully realized trickster hero poses certain problems which Jonson renders particularly subtle by superimposing in the plot of *Volpone* the tales of the fox in the ascendant and the fox in decline" (17). Indeed, through the introduction of a code of legal values into the play's world of criminal schemes, through the space of the legal system and the avocatori the metaphorical figure of the trickster achieves different satirical proportions because audiences can see how the trickster can be duped himself.

[5] In "New Directions: 'Live Free, ... Rob Churches, ... Lend me your Dwarf': What's Funny about *Volpone*?", Rick Bowers identifies other metatheatrical elements that enhance the comedic mode in *Volpone*: "paradox" and "bickering" as forms of "metatheatre" (111). From the perspective of spatial encounters in *Volpone*, metatheatre is a suitable device to suggest the many faces that actors take during performance, the many characters they embody, as well as the theatrical city spaces they traverse.

Power is acknowledged and asserted openly within these urban confines. As Robert Tally observes when writing about topographical surveying of spaces, *"Space could now be measured, divided, quantified, bought and sold, and above all controlled by a particular individual who, in theory, could be the sovereign ruler of all he surveyed"* (Tally *Spatiality*, 18). In *Volpone*, this spatial principle underpins the dramatic action, demonstrating that spatial manipulation is central to both urban existence and dramatic structure. In the play's spatial context, gold is connected with supreme power and kingship, as Mosca relates Celia's love for Volpone to her wish for riches. As Mosca tells Volpone, "Why, your gold / Is such another med'cine, it dries up / All those offensive savours! (5.1.98-100). As Mosca poses in the role of a connoisseur of classical culture, he extends the metaphor of gold to classical myth by saying, "Jove / Could not invent t'himself a shroud more subtle / To pass Acrisius' guards" (5.1.102-104). The classical story refers to Acrisius, the king of Argos and father of Danae. In order to seduce Danae, Zeus (or Jove) came to Danae as a shower of golden rain.[6] Jove, the Roman counterpart of the Greek Zeus, is a symbol of absolute power and godlike glory, so his choice of a shower of gold as a means of seduction of Danae is interpreted by Mosca as a form of bribery of King Acrisius' guards. In this way, Mosca alludes to an intimate story in the bedroom space in order to justify his own greed for gold and illegitimate practices.

From the spatial perspective, Ben Jonson's *Volpone* serves as a prime example of power controlling space, because the play's action concentrates on the control of space—as the one who controls space wields power over others. This reminds of a concept that Bertrand Westphal discusses: **transgressivity (Westphal 37)**, which refers to the fluid passage from one space to another, as if no physical boundaries existed. This concept is evident in the crossing of national borders and territorial limits, where a space can be expanded or contracted according to the playwright's needs. For example, in Jonson's *Volpone*, even if the play is set in Venice, it speaks to Ben Jonson's audience about Jacobean London and its theatre. Mosca and Volpone discuss the gullible greedy characters, as Volpone wonders how is it that they did not see through the deception. Mosca answers, "True, they will not see't. / Too much light blinds 'em, I think" (5.1.22-23). This is not necessarily the real light of the early modern city, nor metaphorically the light of truth, but possibly the light of the Jacobean stage, where human vices are the focus of satire. Thus, the metatheatrical component is brought into the spotlight.

[6] According to the *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (2014) by Jennifer R. March, "When he [Acrisius] consulted an oracle about his lack of a male heir, he was told simply that a son of Danae would one day kill him, so he shut his daughter up in an underground bronze chamber to keep her away from all contact with men. But he reckoned without the great god Zeus, who came to Danae through a chink in the roof of her chamber as a shower of golden rain" (11).

As Mosca continues his explanation of the gulls' greediness, "Each of 'em / Is so possessed and stuffed with his own hopes / That anything unto the contrary, / Never so true, or never so apparent, / Never so palpable, they will resist it" (5.1.23-27). The gullible characters' self-centredness is brought to attention, as it prevents the greedy characters from seeing the truth. As Volpone concludes describing this particular state of self-illusion, their mindset is "Like a temptation of the devil" (5.1.28). The gulls' attitude is not only the impediment of mental blindness to see the truth, or the temptation of gold as the eye of the devil, but also the allurement of the theatre world, which was considered by Ben Jonson's Puritan contemporaries as a temptation of the devil. Thus, through this metatheatrical allusion, the stage space in *Volpone* extends to comprise the variety of human vices, exposed like in a mirror, with notes of self-criticism from Volpone himself. The space of the stage, therefore, becomes the space of power through satire, infiltrating itself like golden rain through the roof of Volpone's house, exposing societal vices in the comedic mode.

Volpone's transgressivity and selfishness—as well as the spaces in which he evolves—take extreme proportions in the play's spatial economy. Volpone's personality develops from the private space of his bedroom, where he worships gold in exquisite metaphors (1.1.1-29), to the public spaces of the Scrutineo, where he seeks justice, and finally to the whole world of Italy, or any other country for that matter. In this context, Italy is not a specific territory, but a metaphor for boundless richness and exploitation of human weaknesses. When Volpone discusses with Mosca about human greed and people's impossibility of seeing the truth because of their own psychological limitations, Volpone says, "Merchants may talk of trade, and your great signiors / Of land that yields well" (5.1.29-30). This statement is in accordance with early modern conceptions about the fruitfulness of the land of Italy.

The narrative according to which Italy was a fruitful and blessed land of richness was a commonplace notion in Ben Jonson's time. For example, in Giovanni Botero's *Relations, of the most famous kingdoms and common-weales thorough the world* (1608), translated into English by Robert Johnston, the description of Italy is extremely laudable, based on ancient authors such as Pliny. As Botero writes, "Italy, (according to Pliny) the most beautiful and goodliest region under the Sun, the darling of Nature & the mother of hardy men, brave captains and valiant souldiers: flourishing in all Arts and abounding with noble wits and men of singular spirits, scituate under a climat most wholesome and temprate, commodious for traffick, and most fertill for corne and herbage" (Botero 129). This is an almost unrealistic image of Italy, based on ancient texts, which shaped the common beliefs about Italy reverberating in England in Ben Jonson's time.

However, in *Volpone*, the space of Italy is referred to in the subjunctive mood, as a potential fruitfulness and richness, were it not marred by greedy people, as the play shows. According to Volpone, merchants may talk of trade and the grand signiors about land that is very fruitful, but the implication is that they all have a hidden agenda for such laudatory descriptions of Italy. When Volpone continues his discussion with Mosca about fictional constructions of geographic or ethnographic reality, observing that merchants may talk of trade and fruitful lands purposefully in a laudatory style for commercial reasons, he says, "but if Italy / Have any glebe more fruitful than these fellows, / I am deceived" (5.1.30-31). Volpone reconsiders the extremely laudatory statements about Italy's lands, as the audience sees the greedy Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino on stage and they can appraise the characters' transgressive behaviour. Realizing that fictional travel narratives are not always in accordance with the reality of a place, Volpone draws attention to the deceitful acclamatory accounts about a certain country for commercial, touristic or political reasons.

In this context, all spaces are inherently embedded within subjective narratives, just as all narratives organize spaces in different ways. As Robert T. Tally observes in the introduction to *Literary Cartographies: Spatiality, Representation, and Narrative* (2014), "maps presuppose narratives, which in turn may function as maps" (Tally *Literary Cartographies*, 1). In *Volpone*, the play's action organizes a narrative of greediness and deceit, which is transmitted through the medium of the theatre—another form of illusion. Just as, in literary cartography, mapping a place is tantamount to telling a story, the play maps the place of Venice (or London) as a transgressive space of corruption and power (or corruption of power), developing within the city's private and public spaces. These spaces, however, are just as shifting and transitory as human emotions, because the reward for delusion is never the truth, but just another illusion. The places of memory that Ben Jonson constructs in *Volpone* are volatile illusions told by means of narratives that last only as long as the play does.

Volpone tells the story of imaginary spaces that contain their own subversion in city comedies. What was considered as an idyllic fruitful and beautiful land with industrious people is seen as a commercial city (Venice or London) inhabited by deceitful people who pursue their own selfish ends. The maps of Italy (Venice) or London that *Volpone* creates are inscribed with the actors' bodies on the wooden stage and they have a transitory existence.

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