

## Jacobean Morality and Moral Performativity in *Volpone* and *Women Beware Women*

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**Abstract:** In *Volpone, or the Fox*, Ben Jonson conveys a moral message, blending the satirical comedy with the feigning death of the protagonist Volpone, who spreads the false news of his death to the legacy hunters. He uses the themes of avarice and moral corruption to criticise societal degeneration. Volpone, Mosca and the three legacy hunters create their self-deceit with a natural tendency towards greed, hypocrisy and disguise which also reveal their corrupt morality and the dramatic irony in the play. The play conveys serious criticism of society such as Corvino's offering his innocent and chaste wife to Volpone to reach his legacy and, also the bad treatment of women. The trial scene bears a serious portrayal of injustice, slander, false witnesses, and the victimization of the innocent and morally good characters. On the other hand, Jonson demonstrates how a person's greed leads to his downfall. Volpone's inner world and motivations for his actions show that he is initially driven by negative traits; greed, extravagance and deception. The motivation behind the excessive need for pleasure and satisfaction, initially, is his need for more material possessions and his fortune, for which he commits unjust actions and acts out deceptive behaviour. Volpone's realisation of his own negative traits and his fatal flaw eventually bring about his downfall. The play emphasises that the sinners are punished while the innocent are rewarded. In *Women Beware Women*, Thomas Middleton displays catastrophic consequences that stem from chaos in the tyrannical Duke's court. The play ends with the death of characters at a court masque scene. It functions as a reiteration of the moral and religious order against earthly pleasures and lust. The Duke, who should be the administrative of the order, becomes the source of corruption in the play, therefore he is punished. In both plays, the former a Jacobean city-comedy and the latter a Jacobean revenge tragedy, societal destructions stemming from a lack of morality have been portrayed. This paper aims to discuss the importance of Venetian and Florentine societies' tendencies in Jonson's and Middleton's plays that depict lack of morality and ethical values as a result of which social disorder becomes a reality and characters are portrayed in an endless endeavour to deceive one another, in order either to survive or to make profit out of any specific situation since higher authorities fail to fulfil their responsibilities.

### Keywords:

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***Volpone ve Women Beware Women* Adlı Oyunlarda  
Kral I. James Dönemine Ait Ahlak Anlayışının Sahnelenmesi**

**Öz:** Ben Jonson *Volpone* (Volpone ya da Tilki) adlı oyunda kendi ölümüyle ilgili yalan haberi miras avcılarına duyurmak için yayan baş karakterin sahte ölümünü satirik komedi türüyle birleştirerek ahlaki bir mesaj verir. Yazar eserinde toplumsal bozulmayı eleştirmek için servet avcılığı ve ahlaki bozulma gibi konuları ele alır. Volpone, Mosca ve üç servet avcısının doğal olarak eğilim gösterdikleri açgözlülük, ikiyüzlülük ve kılık değiştirme gibi konular bir yandan bozuk ahlaki değer yargılarını temsil ederken diğer yandan dramatik ironiyi göz önüne serer ve karakterlerin kendi kendilerini aldattıkları durumlar yaratır. Oyun Corvino adlı karakterin masum ve iffetli eşini Volpone'nin mirasına sahip olabilmek için kendi elleriyle ona sunması ve tüm kadınlara yöneltilen kötü davranışlar gibi toplumsal konuları ciddi şekilde eleştirir. Duruşma sahnesi haksızlığı, iftirayı, sahte tanıklığı, aynı zamanda masum, suçsuz ve ahlaklı karakterlerin mağduriyetini resmeder. Öte yandan Jonson oyunda kişinin ihtirasının kendi çöküşüne sebep olmasını gösterir. Volpone'nin iç dünyasına ve davranışlarına yön veren dürtülerin karakterin temel olarak aç gözlülük, sefahat düşkünlüğü ve aldatma gibi olumsuz karakter özelliklerinden kaynaklandığını gösterir. Karakterin zevk ve mutluluk için aşırı arzu ve hırs beslemesinin arkasındaki temel güdü daha çok maddi varlığa sahip olma isteğidir ve isteklerine sahip olabilmek için hak ve hukuk dışı eylemlerde bulunur, tüm davranışları aldatıcı ve yanıltıcıdır. Volpone'nin karakteriyle ilgili olumsuz özelliklerin farkına varması ve en önemli hatasının bilincine varması çöküşünü de beraberinde getirir. Oyun günahkarların cezalandırılıp masumların ödüllendirilmesine vurgu yapar. Thomas Middleton *Women Beware Women* (Kadınlar Kadınlardan Sakının) adlı oyunda zorba Dük'ün konağındaki karmaşadan doğan felaket sonu sergiler. Oyun konakta sahnelenen maskeli oyundaki karakterlerin ölümüyle sona erer. Maskeli oyun dünyevi hazlara ve şehvete karşı ahlaki ve dini düzenin yinelenmesi ve güçlenmesini aktarma görevini üstlenir. Düzenin sağlanmasından sorumlu olan Dük oyunda tüm yobazlığın ve bozulmuş düzenin mimarı olarak görülür ve bu sebeple cezalandırılır. Her iki oyun da – ki ilki Kral James I dönemine ait bir şehir komedisidir, ikincisi ise aynı döneme ait bir intikam trajedisidir – iyi ahlak yoksunluğundan kaynaklanan toplumsal yıkılmayı tasvir eder. Bu çalışma Jonson'ın ve Middleton'ın oyunlarında ahlaki değerlerin yozlaştığı ve değer yargılarının bozulduğu bir ortamda toplumsal düzensizliğin gerçeklik kazanıp tüm karakterlerin hayatta kalmak için ya da baştaki yöneticilerin sorumluluklarını yerine getiremedikleri için ortaya çıkan her durumdan menfaat sağlamak amacıyla önü alnamaz bir çabayla birbirlerini aldatmalarının Venedik ve Floransa'da yaşayan insanların davranışlarını nasıl etkilediğini tartışmayı amaçlar.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:**

*Volpone*,  
*Women Beware Women*,  
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## Introduction

Ben Jonson's *Volpone, or the Fox* is an example of city comedy first published in 1606 and the play is set in Venice. It is about characters' various schemes of greed, deception, gullibility, and moral corruption because it tells the story of how Volpone, a Venetian nobleman, deceives his greedy business partners; Corbaccio, an ancient nobleman, Voltore, a cunning lawyer, and Corvino, a merchant, with the aid of his cunning servant, Mosca. Volpone pretends to suffer from a fatal disease and plans to make the three gullible men wish for becoming his heirs. The legacy hunters obsessed with wealth engage in intense competition with each other to win Volpone's favour and to inherit his legacy, offering him lavish gifts. The play exposes a mindset of characters' corrupt morality which leads to severe punishment of the evildoers like in Thomas Middleton's revenge tragedy, *Women Beware Women*. Indeed, Jonson criticises the avarice and moral corruption in society, identifying the characters' names with fablelike symbols such as a variety of birds' names, that help reveal a didactic meaning. The play appropriately represents the traits of Jacobean city comedy in which the characters living in urban areas and performing deception and corruption are satirised.

Middleton's *Women Beware Women* is first published in 1657 and probably performed in 1621. It takes place in the court of the Duke of Florence, a place where moral corruption comes mainly in the form of lust. The play is a Jacobean tragedy and this genre emphasises moral corruption, delving into the minds of evildoers. Though lust, sensuality, and revenge are among the major themes of the play, the representation of the court life is one of the important subjects which reveal concerns about the political and social context of the play. *Women Beware Women* presents a morally corrupted and self-indulgent court life. The Duke, the ruler figure of the play, betrays both his kingdom and faith as he deviates from the moral order of his society. The court masque in the fifth act of the play, by Middleton's reinterpretation of the conventional court masques, functions as a dramatic means for the outcomes of revengeful schemes of the characters in the shape of punishment and judgment. It is used to represent the moral corruption of the court and to provide a resemblance between the monarchs of England and Florentine court in *Women Beware Women*. This paper examines the themes of avarice and moral corruption in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and lust and covetousness in Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* demonstrating how the above-mentioned plays reflect social criticism and the traits of Jacobean city comedy and revenge tragedy in the cities they take as the setting. More specifically, the paper discusses the ways in which Venice and Florence become suitable venues for the exhibition of the common themes seen in two distinct genres of

Jacobean theatre. The paper further intends to explore the use of masques, a popular dramatic form in Jacobean drama in *Women Beware Women*.

### **Florence and Venice, Cities of Indulgence and Folly in *Volpone* and *Women Beware Women***

A city comedy first published in 1606, *Volpone* is set in Venice and focuses on the main character, the rich nobleman Volpone's greedy nature and the city life of Venice with its members of the society. In this play, Ben Jonson focuses on thoroughly important topics; a corrupt social order and fatal humane flaws, such as greed or deception. It has many satirical elements about money, monetary gains, and double-dealing. In the play, among many characters who are very greedy about making money and desiring more such as Volpone and Mosca, there are also other characters who stand for the moral and spiritual virtues like Celia and Bonario. Extreme temperaments of characters cause some chaos in Venetian society which ends up in social corruption and devastation. The play depicts extravagantly good or evil natures of the characters and how acquisitiveness and cheating lead to the corruption of the moral structure of Venetian society. A special emphasis on couples, such as Volpone and Mosca who represent sin and deception, and Celia and Bonario who do not give up their sense of honour and carry on with their fair attitudes is inevitable in observing Venetian society through Jonson's observation. Celia and Bonario are harmless people, their generously fair attitudes and bravery make them vulnerable in Venetian society where legal authorities' ability to control and provide justice is lacking. Their vulnerability makes the representation of society's corrupt action more uncompromising and therefore more unwavering.

Volpone and Mosca are the sources of corruption with all their tricks and follies. At the very beginning of the play, Volpone greets his gold, "Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is / The teeming earth to see the long'd-for sun / Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram, / Am I, to view thy splendour dark'ning his, / . . . O thou son of Sol- / But brighter than thy father, let me kiss, / With adoration thee" (1.1.3-6, 10-12), by which he puts the gold and treasure above God and religious faith. He asserts gold is brighter than the sun, putting material gains above celestial elements. Jakob Ladegaard in the article "Luxurious Laughter. Wasteful Economy in Ben Jonson's comedy, *Volpone*, or *The Fox* (1606)," explains that "Volpone's idolatrous worship of gold is in essence a worship of luxury. In the Christian Middle Ages luxury (*luxuria*) designed excessive bodily appetites, in particular, 'lust'. It is therefore not surprising that Volpone is a voluptuary, who is ready to spend a fortune to sleep with Corvino's wife Celia" (65). Volpone's obsession with luxury and monetary gains leads him to immoral activities and provides a basis for corruption. Harriet Hawkins in her article, "Folly, Incurable Disease, and *Volpone*," states that "Volpone suffers the very punishment he metes out for the banquets of the senses he so eagerly anticipates are never enjoyed," (339) and in consequence of his self-deception, Volpone lives "the fool's life of self-induced frustration and self-denial" (340). As he steals from other people and does not allow them to enjoy their riches, he

also does not get to enjoy his riches because he has to pretend to be an old, sick man on his deathbed. On the other hand, Mosca's speech "O! your parasite / Is a most precious thing, dropt from above, / . . . All the wise world is little else, in nature, / But parasites or sub-parasites," (3.1.7-10, 12-13) helps him admit that he is the real parasite and he seems very proud of what he observes about himself as a parasite. The relationship between Mosca and Volpone stands as the cornerstone of the parasitism in the play as Mosca is the exemplary of parasitism. On the other hand, Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore form the idea of parasitism on a detrimental scale. Mosca is aware of the fact that the three suitors of Volpone are nothing but parasites perhaps just like himself. Sarah Syed Kazmi argues "Mosca further highlights that it requires skill and art to be a parasite, and hence only the wise can practice the art of being a parasite. A conniving, parasitical existence is a litmus test of success for Mosca as borne by the theme of the play" (134). Mosca's situation applies to Venetian society generally as well, because if cheating by assuming the role of a parasite is illustrated as something extraordinary and professional, it is inevitable for such a society illustrated in the play to collapse and shatter into pieces.

Next to the couple, Volpone and Mosca, another couple's portrayal is very much supportive of relating to the theme of gullibility in the play. Celia and Bonario act out important roles because they have all the things that Volpone, Mosca and other deceitful characters lack such as religious faith and a sense of honour. However, this purity makes them more vulnerable and easy prey for the devilish Volpone and satanic Mosca. S. L. Goldberg in the article, "Folly into Crime: The Catastrophe of *Volpone*" reads the folly of Celia and Bonario as "a distant reminiscence of the "folly" of Lear's Fool, which is the unworldly wisdom of the simple and innocent" (234). As the only characters in the play who do not have secret plans and tricks up their sleeve, Celia and Bonario become the ones to not only discover the truth but also reveal it to others. When Volpone forces her to a sexual affair with him, Celia says that "Yet feed your wrath, sir, rather than your lust, / (It is a vice comes nearer manliness,) / And punish that unhappy crime of nature" (3.7.248-50). Celia's naivety in defending herself against Volpone is evident in her speech. In rejecting him, she becomes so passionate that she starts to blame her beauty as being a "crime of nature" which sounds weak to Volpone and his greed becomes uncontrollable. Volpone's attempt to rape Celia is nonetheless interrupted by Bonario. Celia's self-defence or better stated, perhaps, her defencelessness becomes her own destruction. Alan C. Dessen in his article, "*Volpone* and the Late Morality Tradition," argues that "Although her faith remains steadfast, her arguments succeed only in increasing Volpone's desire for possession. The results to come, barring intervention, are obvious" (391). Celia is a faithful and resident character. Equally, she should act bold and stern in order to protect herself from the harsh attacks of others. To gain Volpone's wealth, Corvino the crow is willing to offer Celia to Volpone to have sexual intercourse with her. Celia is objectified both by her husband Corvino and Volpone, for whom Celia is like his gold. If it is about being rich, there is no honour to be considered for Corvino. He says, "Honour! Tut a breath / There's no such a thing in nature; a mere term / Invented to awe fools. What, is my gold / The

worse for touching, clothes for being looked on?" (3.7.38-41). He compares touching gold with his wife being touched by someone else. His lust for money leads him to folly and gullibility so much that he readily offers his wife to Volpone. Like Celia, Bonario is also a moral and religious character who undertakes the necessary positive responsibilities for the sake of an orderly scheme of society. On Celia's occasion, her naivety underlies the social problems that lead to corruption in Venice. Bonario mentions that "This cannot be a personated passion / I was to blame, so to mistake thy nature; / Prithee forgive me: and speak out thy business" (3.2.35-37). Bonario is weak and defenceless to Mosca, who directs Bonario to the bedroom. Bonario says "Lead; I follow thee" (3.2.71) and in that sentence, the word "lead" is important because Bonario allows Mosca to dominate himself completely both physically and metaphorically. As Dessen claims, "[e]ven more significant are the reasons for Bonario's presence on the scene in the first place. Mosca, with his usual manipulative skill, had placed Bonario in hiding so that the son could hear himself being disowned and perhaps help his father to an untimely end" (393-94). Bonario hears about his father's intention to disinherit him in order to receive Volpone's inheritance. Corbaccio is in pursuit of more material possession and Volpone's legacy, for which he commits immoral actions and acts out deceptive behaviour.

Obsession with monetary gains and cheating corrupt Venetian society and these are among the leading themes of *Volpone*. Opposite couples, Volpone-Mosca and Celia-Bonario share common features such as being imposters as in the former couple and moral values of society as in the latter couple. In both cases, characters help expose society's lack of ethical values that result in moral corruption. In fact, Venetian society is portrayed as a threat to one another; even if one is innocent and moral, it brings another problem because the villains take some parts of their power from the weak and the defenceless which causes bigger corruption. When it comes to the monetary gains, one can say that all the villainies in the play spring from the addiction to luxury and monetary gains. This addiction intensifies and reaches innocents by affecting them badly. Ben Jonson handles this morality issue in a play that belongs to the genre of city comedy. Dessen argues that "if the end of comedy for Jonson was more than the mere 'moving of laughter,' a consideration of 'morality' elements in his mature plays may prove useful" (384). The genre of city comedy and the concept of morality coincide in Ben Jonson's play and while the play amuses the audience with the extravagancies, follies, and exaggerated ambitions of the characters, it enables a clear understanding of the social problems and internalization of the moral messages. "To bee a foole borne, is a disease incurable," says Volpone (2.2.161), as he pretends to be a mountebank who attempts to sell "the oil of Scoto," (2.2.22) a remedy for all types of diseases. The play is deeply interested in the idea of folly and gullibility and Volpone's speech raises the question of what folly is all about to which the play offers a variety of answers. As discussed before, couples such as Volpone and Mosca and Celia and Bonario develop relationships that set examples of gullibility and folly. Sir Politic Would-Be and Peregrine is another couple the play launches in presenting differences between the gullible and guileful characters. Each of these pairs represents a

different dictionary meaning of the word folly and therefore help build the theme of deceitfulness in the play.

The next couple under discussion, Sir Politic Would-Be and Peregrine, sheds light on a possible meaning of folly that is questioned in the play. This pair, when their intentions and actions are closely considered, demonstrates the same thing as Volpone and Mosca. Like Volpone and Mosca, they fool one another. Sir Politic Would-Be and Peregrine's doing is not on a scale of crime or wickedness but very harmless. Similar to the case with the leading couple of the play they also expose an example of the mirror image because Sir Politic Would-Be is a naïve character who thinks highly of himself and Peregrine is the actual clever person that Sir Politic Would-Be would mirror if he could. Their first interaction in Act II scene I is the starting point for the rest of their relationship. In a conversation, Peregrine discovers the naivety of Sir Politic Would-Be and fools him by saying that "there was a whale discovered in the river" (2.1.46). Although what Peregrine does is very similar to what Volpone does in the sense that they both fool people; unlike Volpone, Peregrine is not doing this out of his pursuit of wealth and power, to be precise for his own gain or schemes. There is no indication that Peregrine has anything to get out of this folly other than just a good laugh probably behind Sir Politic Would-Be. Sir Politic Would-Be poses an interesting example as a character. Unaware of what's going on around him but always pretending to be a man who knows everything, he becomes a smaller scale example of Volpone although at times he makes interesting comments. Like Volpone, Sir Politic Would-Be's thoughts and speeches concentrate on materialism, and he leads the same ostentatious lifestyle as Volpone. Both Volpone and Sir Politic are fond of luxury and ostentation; however, Sir Politic Would-Be has not got the crafty mind of Volpone. He lacks Volpone's subtlety and guile, therefore his plans about becoming rich do not progress. Sir Politic Would-Be makes clear that he wants to have the assistance of a trusty henchman, like Peregrine, to help him in his money-making projects. He implies that Peregrine is the right person to undertake this, as Mosca is for Volpone. In Act II scene II he makes observations about Volpone's disguised character that are totally not true. But in another scene, his commentary becomes very ironic. After Volpone and Mosca's schemes are discovered by Bonario and Celia, Sir Politic Would-Be, who is unaware of the situation, makes a comment and says, "I told you, sir, it was a plot" (4.1.1). Combined with his naïve character, the accuracy of his words after the previous scene becomes very interesting and also comical with the knowledge that he's not talking about the actual plot of Volpone and Mosca. Ben Jonson explores the theme of folly through the above-mentioned couple of characters. Volpone and Mosca's evil schemes, Sir Politic Would-Be and Peregrine's more innocent exchanges and Celia and Bonario's untainted approach all become ways of building the theme of folly in the play. Celia and Bonario are two examples of moral characters who resist gold's magic. Unlike her husband Corvino, who ordered her to sleep with Volpone, she cannot do it; both because it is a sin to her and she is a pure believer and, because she cannot bring herself to cheat on her husband. She does the right thing in her own sense but it brings her trouble as her

rejecting Volpone means the game of the heirs is falling apart. After she resists to be with Volpone and Volpone says he will have her forcefully, Bonario emerges and saves her. Nonetheless, she is accused of being a harlot in front of the judges and the judges believe in this lie. Eventually, she is rescued. Corvino is dismissed which enables Celia to gain her freedom. Because of her husband's jealousy, she was always limited: "She's kept as warily as is [Volpone's] gold; / Never does come abroad, never takes air, / But at a window" (2.1.118-20). Her captivity ends with Corvino's departure. Like Celia, Bonario does not adore Volpone's gold and like her, he was rewarded in the end. He inherits the money which his father intended to give Volpone.

The second play under discussion is Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women*. It is a revenge tragedy, set in Florence and shaped around the plots of betrayal, corruption, lust, and violence as the play is about the intricacies of how the Duke of Florence tries to seduce a newlywed, sixteen years old young woman, Bianca with the help of a cunning and clever widow, Livia. Bianca is the daughter of a wealthy and noble family, but she secretly marries Leantio, a merchant's clerk and lives with his widow mother. Leantio's mother finds Bianca too much for her son and family in terms of socioeconomic class and leads her son to have a kind of inferiority complex. Because of his inferiority complex and his patriarchal understanding, Leantio tries to control Bianca's sexuality by holding her sequestered in a lodging at a distance. Livia also arranges an incestuous affair in which she lies to her niece, telling Isabella that her uncle Hippolito, Livia's brother, does not have a blood-relation to her, so they can experience a love affair with each other. Due to her manipulative nature, Livia is portrayed as a female who has a strong influence in her family that is part of the patriarchal society. She has a significant role in developing the concerns of female transgression and rape which also belong to the Jacobean revenge tragedy. Middleton thoroughly criticises the shallow understanding of morality and its boundaries which force to lead his characters astray in the axis of betrayal, corruption, lust, and violence. The Duke abuses his public responsibility and moral understanding of society by chasing and raping another man's wife. Middleton criticises the hypocritical moral understanding of society through the theme of rape. The Duke's rape is a kind of illustration of corruption in society. Leonardo Buonomo in his article "Domestic Themes in Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women*," defines the Duke as a corrupt representative of authority who misuses his power to satisfy his personal lusts and pleasures, ignoring his political responsibilities (26). Indeed, the Duke abuses his power to seduce Bianca and flaunts his relationship with Bianca in society, so his aristocratic privilege allows him to follow his passion rather than the moral expectations of society. Moreover, the Cardinal, the Duke's brother, is described as a weak religious figure because he has anxiety about how society will react to the Duke's indiscreet affair with Bianca rather than morality, by saying: "But 'tis example proves the great man's bane. / The sins of mean men lie like scattered parcels / Of an unperfect bill; but when such fall, / Then comes example, and that sums up all" (1.1.216-19).



He reveals that the sins of mean men can be managed and considered unimportant, but the fall of great men affects all ranks of society. The Duke's seduction and rape of Bianca and the Cardinal's corrupt and distorted morality demonstrate the level of hypocrisy and corruption in Florentine society. According to Anthony B. Dawson, as he discusses in the article, "*Women Beware Women* and the Economy of Rape," the role of the Cardinal, normally taken as either straight or ironic by commentators, illustrates the strain the text is under (316). This strain is the reflection of Middleton's criticism towards the crooked morality in Florentine society. The Cardinal's exemplification of the fraudulent morality strengthens the climate of tragicomedy in the play. As a result, Middleton demonstrates the venality of religious and political institutions as represented in society in the city of Florence and he reviews hypocrisy and superficial morality through the theme of rape.

As the ruler in the play, The Duke is the central character and an emblem through which the court life is depicted. Albert H. Tricomi argues that *Women Beware Women* should be recognised as a political tragedy and an anticourt drama in which the moral corruption of the court and the ruler is represented (65). The Duke is the central political figure in the play and the origin of the corruption. The play juxtaposes the "princely authority and the reality of the Duke's lust" and reveals the sensual and private part of the Duke's personality (Tricomi 66). His first appearance in the play is in the first act and demonstrates his public image as a ruler. The second act, on the other hand, demonstrates the private life of the Duke. Trying to seduce and persuade Bianca into a romantic and sexual affair, the Duke reminds Bianca of his political power: "I can command / Think upon that" (2.2.360-61). In effect, the play reveals how the Duke "[e]xploits his exalted, public presence to achieve lowly, private ends" (Tricomi 66). Thus, the ruler figure in the play uses his political power for an immoral aim. Trying to seduce Bianca and arranging the murder of her husband, the Duke exploits his political position. Laura Severt King in her article, "Violence and the Masque: A Ritual Sabotaged in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*," argues that "all of the violence in the play is a direct consequence of this action—the ruler's treason against himself and his kingdom" (44). The misuse of political power is treason against the Duke's kingdom and the Christian morality which is ordained by God.

Not only the ruler but also the court life in the play is an indication of moral degeneration. Aristocratic members of the court are fond of material riches, profligacy, and incestuous relationships. Livia's speech in the second act demonstrates her fondness for shrewdness: "I could give as shrewd a lift to chastity / As any she that wears a tongue in Florence" (2.1.36-37). Guardiano's courtly manners, on the other hand, are only a feigned kindness under which there are corrupted plans in service of the Duke's sexual profligacy. Indira Ghose in "Middleton and the Culture of Courtesy" defines Guardiano as a character "whose façade of Petrarchism hides the reality of ducal procurer" (11). Trying to convince Bianca to accept his service, Guardiano hides his greater plans underneath his

courtly manners: “If you but give acceptance to my service, / You do the greatest grace and honour to me / That courtesy can merit” (2.2.283-85).

The forced marriage of Isabella is another example of corruption. Fabritio defines her daughter “dear to my purse” and reveals his motivations to make her daughter marry Ward (3.2.106). Introducing “Jacobean grievance of enforced marriage and abused wardship,” Isabella’s marriage takes place only for the sake of material richness and social status of Ward (Tricomi 70). Fabritio states that he raised Isabella as a “gentlewoman,” talented in dancing and singing, who is suitable for court life and courtly manners (3.2.108-09). Fabritio’s concerns for genteel manners are only for material ends, just like Guardiano’s are for sexual licentiousness. Ghose argues that the court life in Middleton’s play is “one of art, music, chess, of sumptuous banquets and extravagant masques” (10). However, courtly manners do not signify a moral inner value. It is used to hide a “deeper decay” and reveal a “culture saturated with corruption” (Ghose 13).

As discussed above, Middleton’s play includes many characters who give into their desires and have forgotten about their duties. The Duke himself who tries and succeeds to seduce married Bianca, Hippolito who is in love with his niece Isabella, and Livia who lies and conspires to meet her goals are, to an extent, a reflection of the Jacobean people’s complaints about the social disorder they lived in. Jacobean England witnessed a crisis of order that began in early modern times and reached a climax in the 1650s. The correlation between good order within the individual and throughout society resulted in intense anxiety about the expected disorder, and the person of the king with new immediacy became the central concern of the Jacobeans. Dissatisfaction with the rule of the country reached a climax during the Stuart reign beginning with James I who did not appeal to his subjects. Disappointment elicited friction between the King and the parliament. *Women Beware Women* exemplified the consequences of lust’s harm in two interrelated spheres of the body and the state. The interrelation between the personal and the political gave the play its wide scope, both in universal and topical spheres. In Anne McLaren’s article, “New Directions: *Women Beware Women* and Jacobean Cultural Narratives” found in *Women Beware Women: A Critical Guide*, the historical background leading to the representations we see in the play are given. A Jacobean sentiment towards the rulers by the people are described in the article, “the Duke personally embodies — he is — the ‘state’. The widespread acceptance of this equivalence during this period made the character of the ruler — his desires, virtues, vices — a matter of the greatest importance. Only gradually over the seventeenth century did the word ‘constitution’ begin to take on an abstract political significance in addition to a humoral one” (108). Thus, if the Duke or any ruler is to be a mirror image of his/her kingdom and subjects, then the individual in power whether he is a character in a play or a monarch at a particular historical period, not only explains the public perception of the current social situation but also *Women Beware Women*’s characters in particular.

Specifically, in the first encounter of the Duke with Bianca when she appears on the balcony, the ruler appears in his full glory, affiliated to his people and his kingdom, yet lusting for a married woman and exploitation of his courtly powers in a shameless way to fulfil his desires. Tricomi states that

The surface gentility of his coercion is as important as its underlying brutality, for only once does he suggest the force that lies at his disposal should she refuse. And he touches lightly on the subject: 'I can command, / Think upon that' (II.ii.362-63), the highlighted point is that the Duke's power is so evident and so overwhelming so much so that he needs not to employ it blatantly. In this way Middleton deglamorizes the 'royal' sexual liaison, simultaneously uniting the tragedy's anticourt purview with its object lesson in the base uses of statecraft. (66)

In fact, Middleton's clever way of setting up a scene about a Florentine Duke, from the first act serves as a dramatic example of the current state of affairs to the viewers, that is to say, a case about immoral if not unlawful exploitation of power.

At the end of the play, particularly in the masque scene, all complications unfold and the immoral decisions of the characters bring about their end, a way for Middleton to finalise his play's underlying message. With the voice of reason and morality in the play, the Cardinal, having the last word, the catastrophic events resulting in the lustful characters' deaths present what becomes of the immoral people, confirming their sentiments towards this sort of behaviour. Jacobean images often depicting rulers and nobility in a state of moral corruption and the disorderly state were all elucidated on the Jacobean stage and in *Women Beware Women* with many characters including the Duke, Bianca, Hippolito, Isabella, and Livia. The Duke uses his power to fulfil his lust, causing his own downfall at the court masque, at the end of the play. Instead, the Duke was thought to display an image of bonding and love to his subjects. As a Jacobean tragedy, Middleton's work serves as a perfect example of how morality was in high demand during the time the playwright produced works for the stage. People wished to see rulers as fair practitioners of their culture and morals, but in the end, the model they wanted to see was limited to the ones on stage and Middleton satisfied that demand appropriately.

### **Middleton's Reinterpretation of Court Masques in *Women Beware Women***

In *Women Beware Women* the court masque scene bears huge importance, and it can be taken as the climax of the play. The court masque scene is the part where all the complexities unravel, and the symbolism irradiates the major concerns of the play. In this scene, the true natures of the characters are revealed. The fact that the unknitting of the events happens in a court masque is very ironic because their masks fall off in a masked event. As John Potter in his article, "In Time of Sports': Masques and Masking in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*," suggests "their surface of peace and civility becomes through Middleton's art a tragic ironic mask which exposes the character' doubleness of mind, their self-deception laid upon self-deception, their inability to face fully the extent of their own evil. *Women Beware Women* is about masques and masks"

(369). Characters' corrupted nature is revealed through games, acting, and performative utterances and some of them enact more efficiently than others. By revealing characters' true faces in a court masque, Middleton underlines the idea about the play's main reference to the masks which characters wear. "The preparations for the masque begin with the final confrontation of Leantio and Bianca. The scene is short but very painful in its exploration of their alienation not just from each other but from themselves" (Potter 375). In Leantio's and Bianca's final confrontation, characters cannot recognise each other as they have become someone different than they are. However, the most important detail about the use of masks and concealing their true identities is that they recognise that they cannot identify themselves, as well.

Court masques are important in the historical sense and it is essential to consider the historical background of the court masques during King James I's reign. Caroline Baird in her article, "From Court to Playhouse and Back: Middleton's Appropriation of the Masque" explains the significance of court masques and Middleton's interest in them:

In the early seventeenth-century, James I and his Danish queen transformed mumming, or the Tudor practice of masked dancers unexpectedly appearing at a festivity, into a phenomenon known as the court masque. A newly commissioned masque became de rigueur for *Twelfth Night* and Shrovetide revelry at Whitehall and an indispensable part of any celebration in the court calendar. The coming of age of Prince Henry and the creation of Charles as duke of York were both celebrated with masques. The royal wedding of Princess Elizabeth saw no fewer than three masques commissioned. (57)

Apart from being a source of entertainment, court masques have an important part in the political arena of the time the play was written. Court masques used to take place on Christmas or Easter particularly to exhibit the monarch's hospitality and his or her attachment to the traditions. However, in *Women Beware Women*, Thomas Middleton mocks this sense given to court masques. His stance about court masques is reminiscent of the standpoint of a common citizen. It reflects the people's perspective of his time.

Tragedy's systematic juxtaposition of the beneficent public images of authority with the sordid, private reality; second, its exposure of the court as an over-sophisticated, morally effete institution; . . . and fourth, its representation of conventional court masque in accordance with the antithetical conventions of the revenge masque, thereby radically reinterpreting the court's sustaining mythology as a beneficent, paternal, godlike culture. All of these dramatic features reveal *Women Beware Women* as an ironic tragedy composed from a citizen's Christian stand-point, as bespeaks Middleton's own social position as a pageant-composer and playwright of London. (Tricomi 65)

Middleton's way of using a court masque scene hints at the manners and morals of the ruling body in his time. Corruption of the monarchy and nobility is parallel to the perversion of characters in the play. The end of the play reveals no mask can hide the true nature of a human and corruption cannot be hidden by masks. Leantio is fatally wounded

by Hippolito and dies before the last act. The Duke provokes Hippolito to protect Livia's honour and in the masque that takes place in the final act, Hippolito dies shortly after kissing Livia's lips who is already dead by the poisoned smoke of the incense.

### Conclusion

In examining Volpone's avarice, an evaluation of his relationship with his prey, the predatory birds, Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino, is helpful. C. J. Gianakaris, in the article "Identifying Ethical Values in *Volpone*" creates a hierarchy between these three carrion birds with Voltore being on top of the food chain of legacy hunters followed by Corvino and lastly Corbaccio. To begin with, Voltore is indeed a character that takes well-calculated actions such as his orchestrations during the trial in act IV. He is, however, no exemption from the three as they all fall into the fox's trap. "Near the end," Gianakaris suggests, "Voltore's humiliation at having been seduced by Mosca prods him, and his conscience ultimately rebels" (52). His conscience, in other words, overcomes his greed. However, his cunning nature does not exempt him from the greed he has shown on the stage. Secondly, Corvino, a man of impulses and desires fails to act rationally and calculated very much like Voltore. He makes his wife Celia have an affair with Volpone in pursuit of the inheritance and displays his lack of a moral scope on stage. Finally, in a similar morally and socially corrupt way, Corbaccio disinherits his son due to Mosca's schemes, abandoning family values in pursuit of riches and ends up in the palm of the fox. Thus, all the predatory birds, no matter how shrewd they are, fail to surpass the fox's slyness or at the very least survive this struggle without scars. From a wider viewpoint, Volpone's greed discussed in the beginning corrupts different individuals from different backgrounds all the same, because they all share one common trait which is greed.

*Women Beware Women*, on the other hand, represents select issues like love, lust, revenge interwoven with the political concerns of the play. Middleton portrays the ruling figure as degenerate and depraved and the ruling power represented by those whose sexual and material greed causes chaos and grievance both within the court and also for ordinary people like Leantio and Bianca. *Women Beware Women* dramatises a political catastrophe in which the ruler's private ambitions, lust and the exploitation of his political power lead to a disaster.

Consequently, the themes of money, monetary gain, folly, immorality, and greed stay central throughout *Volpone* by Jonson and *Women Beware Women* by Middleton through the playwrights' demonstrations of Venetian and Florentine elite who, in their capitalist ambitions, fall prey either to more cunning opponents or to their own selves. It is, without doubt, that the plays serve a didactic function in their representation of lack of morality and of what becomes to the greedy, licentious, voracious, revengeful people. It is a warning from the rich cities of Venice and Florence to London in Jonson's and Middleton's time, and to the whole world in our time that the social corruption and

disappearance of moral values are often natural outcomes of vengeance, greed, and the desire for money.

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