

# THE DOUBLE-PROCESS: READING THE 'BODY' IN BEN JONSON'S *VOLPONE*

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper will try to unearth the multiple possibilities of examining the 'body' as the agent of performance and the politics that seems to loom large over the concept when it comes to its representation in the theatre. Ben Jonson's comic masterpiece *Volpone* (1606) is a play that chiefly dwells in the proliferation of the "double-process"—that is, the confirmation and the deliberate rejection of the body. This aspect of rejection of the body on the stage (which is always in the mode of representation) can be seen as a ploy adopted by Jonson to cater to the whims and aspirations of the Renaissance theatre-going public given their increasing concern over human anatomy which has had almost become an obsession at that point of time. The coterie of characters which gain an upper hand in terms of 'body-rejection' are the minions of *Volpone*—Nano, Castrano, Andryogeno—who are accorded a significant interest in the consideration of the politics of the body. The paper will enter the discussion through a cursory estimate of the usage and perception of the body during the Renaissance much of which was governed by the ideals of Renaissance humanism fashioned by Giambattista Vico and Jakob Brukhardth. In the process of this discussion, the paper will try to suggest possibilities in order to authenticate the anthropocentric view which dominated*

*much of the critical debates of the time. Lastly, the paper will try to analyse the characters according to their humours and in doing so, will place Jonson and his age in the present context to assess the viability and universality of the human subject with an Indian subject position.*

**Key Words:** *Body Politic, Double-Process, Performativity, 'Verstehen'*

*For I refuse the title of artist to those who owe their reputation to a physical deformity. I regard them as buffoons. (Sarah Bernhardt, *The Art of Theatre*)*

Ben Jonson's highly acclaimed play *Volpone* (1606) is a brilliant dramatic achievement because although it is seen as a quintessential English Jacobean/Renaissance play, it has since then, invited many critical debates concerning the importance and function of the 'body' that seems to be one of the central concerns in the play. The reception history of the play itself indicates the sheer audacity with which Jonson tried to mock at the follies and foibles of the then English society by using the most potent weapon in his literary arsenal—comedy. Jonson strove to create an image of authorship by fashioning himself as a monolithic classicist, literary pedant and political reactionary as is evident in his

outright denunciation of the more sophisticated and elite class of audience of the seventeenth century English society. It is this same Jonson who had previously won accolades for introducing the English stage with the functional concept of “humours” through his celebrated duos *Everyman in His Humour* and *Everyman out of His Humour*. In both these plays, there is a constant anatomical reference to the discovery of the ‘fluids’ in the human body that goes in the making of individual disposition and temper. The idea of presence of the four fluids in the human body—bile, phlegm, choler and melancholy—affirms the Renaissance buoyancy and the spirit of discovery that seem to govern the taste and attitude of the theatre-going public. It also serves to highlight yet another outstanding discovery—the discovery of the circulation of blood in the human body by William Harvey which had changed the contours of anatomical science. In *Volpone*, however, this ‘fluid’ concept does not get much preference but the ‘body’ as an agent of ‘discovery’ and as an ‘object of inquiry’ gains credence. The ‘double process’ highlighted in the title is therefore an examination of this dualistic significance of the body.

The ideology behind the politics of the body during the early seventeenth century Renaissance drama assumes tremendous significance due to its insistence on portraying social and political evils in terms of “sexual deviation and bodily excess” (Whigham, 33). Discourses on sexual transgression were not something uncommon at this age. Thomas Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* and the major plays of Shakespeare, Chapman, Marston, Webster and Middleton are all instances in point. What becomes more intriguing is the manner in which these playwrights project the ‘body’ with due recognition of the alimentary focus on

Renaissance medicine. The shift from theocentric to anthropocentric world order during the Renaissance provided these playwrights ample space to concentrate on the variegated aspects of human anatomy. This eventually lead to the issues of sexuality, sexual difference, gender consciousness in terms of role playing and the ‘desire’ of the ‘body’ as reflected in the appropriation of the human body in the theatre.

The “absolute centrality of the body to Renaissance culture” which Jonathan Sawday underlines in his study of anatomy and dissection as “master tropes for an early modern epistemology and for its ensuing forms of representation” (Sawday,27) can be taken as a cue to study the Renaissance politics of “using” the body as an object of study. The human body became a prime model of anatomical investigation and study within the Renaissance culture. Sawday thus emphasises on how the body came to be textualised during the Renaissance:

The body was territory, an (as yet) undiscovered country, a location which demanded from its explorers skills which seemed analogous to those displayed by the heroic voyagers across the terrestrial globe (Sawday,23).

It becomes imperative here to make explicit certain ideas regarding the very contestable notion of body politics in the theatre. The term ‘body politics’ normally refers to the political connotations of the material bodies, bodies on which major socio-political issues are contested and played out in time and space, and the political body of the nation. Body politics, when looked at from theatrical standpoint connotes a multi-layered perspective as to the politics of the body on stage, the gendered subjectivity, the politics of representation, the body of the Other,

the performing body, the actor/audience encounter, the body of the audience, the context-specific historical and cultural production and the politics of meaning, the real/post-real representation and so forth. The present study will seek to arrive at a negotiation of this multi-layered ideological position as the corporeal participation of the body in the theatre and its very 'presence' on stage leaves the spectator to either labour hard in making meaning out of it as participatory engagement, or to assume that theatre itself in all its variegated manifestations cannot work without the agency of the body. In other words, the paper seeks to arrive at the assumption that the acting body in the theatre not only invests meaning to the performance but also lends and imparts credibility to the entire project of spectatorship.

The Renaissance stage is seen as "a decoder for erotic experience, used both to reinforce and subvert expected sexual behaviour" (Zimmerman, i). The body serves to be the abode of both sexuality and eroticism because these two conditions are unimaginable without the conceptual presence of the body. The idea of 'desire' is intricately linked with the body having its origins in the mind. According to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, 'desire' is always a 'desire of' something; it arises due to the experience of a 'lack'. *Volpone* abounds in eroticism as it exposes not only the mentality of the characters through satire but also highlights the carnal desires of the body on stage. The perennial condition of 'lust' is presented as a fascination for the body of the other—here the "Other Body" can be seen through the lens of gender differentiation. The female body is always seen as a foreign element by the male body and is ever anxious to 'know' it in specific details. This can be argued from the various behavioural symptoms and psychological

obsessions of the male body such as voyeurism when it happens to encounter a female/foreign body. This condition is heavily couched in psychoanalysis by various conditional referents such as 'penis envy' and it would absorb an entire thesis altogether if we concentrate on it. Therefore, the irresistible urge of the body to 'know' can be seen as a cultural conditioning because sexuality is always at stake when the idea of 'difference' is taken into consideration.

In *Volpone*, the eponymous character is portrayed as a lustful individual who undergoes various disguises. The disguise as a mountebank perfectly suits the intention lurking within Volpone as he is successful in having a glimpse of the 'Other Body'—the body of Celia. This intensifies his lust all the more when we find him confiding to Mosca about his desire for Celia. However, it would be a very reductive approach if we reject Celia as a mere object of lust.

Celia, no doubt, is the source of male desire in the play but the desire of Volpone is replenished further by the machinations of Corvino who forces his wife to win Volpone's favours by deploying her physical charms. Nonetheless, we cannot just look at the act of Corvino's pressurising his wife as forced prostitution. This would be quite fallacious because Corvino hates to be designated as a city-cuckold. On the contrary, given the circumstances of Volpone's feigned physical recovery, Corvino's real intention is to generate 'pleasure' in Volpone by sacrificing his wife's chastity and thereby to become the chief begetter in the race for Volpone's prospective heirs. Volpone, on the other hand, successfully dupes the legacy-hunters by the sheer brilliance of his role-playing duly assisted by Mosca with whose connivance he succeeds in extracting huge fortunes from the legacy-hunters as gifts. The play however, proves once again, the debated contention that

“desire is an endless process of deferment” (Zimmerman, 2) as we find that Volpone’s desire for Celia is deferred by the new twist that pops up as an anabasis<sup>2</sup> in the form of Bonario’s timely entrance to save Celia from losing her chastity.

The ‘radical actuality’ of the body (appropriating the phrase from Stanton Garner) “introduces a *danse macabre* of theatrical looking that moves between absorption and repulsion, reversing the otherwise consumptive gaze of the onlooker” (Alvarez, 35). The anatomical theatre invited numerous viewing procedures to provide a theatrical space to view the body and to study it in terms of human anatomy. The idea of anatomy theatre can be ascribed to the near-invisible nature of the misshapen inmates of Volpone’s household projecting the ‘reprobate body’ in its natural deformities—the dwarf Nano suggests smallness, the eunuch Castrone suggests emasculation and the hermaphrodite Androgyno suggests traits of both the gender. No doubt, the character of Androgyno invites serious consideration of gender, but it also pose an essential question—why did Jonson portray such characters in a play satirizing the follies and foibles of the aristocratic class? The answer perhaps begets a due recourse to the then society’s preoccupation with the human body as an *object* of study. In the play, the ‘reprobate body’ challenges the ethics of spectatorship<sup>3</sup> by confining itself within the limits of the theatrical space. In *Volpone*, however, one does not encounter any lurid experimentation *on* the body such as dissection which was much in vogue during the Renaissance.

The image of the bastards in *Volpone* becomes another significant area of interest. The body of the bastards are expressively linked with deformed persons and eunuchs. Francis Bacon

in his essay “Of Envy” states that the bastards are creatures whose ‘natural wants’ may render them vicious (Neill, 287). This is reiterated in *Volpone* in the deformity of the heteroclite brood—dwarf, eunuch and hermaphrodite—which Volpone has supposedly begotten through some clandestine affairs. In the like manner, Corbaccio disinherits his son Bonario. This act of disinheriting swells up as the play progresses and finally consummates in the bastardizing of Bonario. Now, the act of bastardizing in performance begets serious consideration of spectatorship as it ‘confirms’ as well as ‘rejects’ the ‘body on stage. Bonario’s body undergoes a transitional sweep as it fails to uphold the former glory and pristine nature of his body prior to his disinheritance. It serves to highlight the theatrical nuances of performance as the act of disinheritance or bastardization rests on the characteristic feature of performativity. The body is disowned and so devalued; it becomes, phenomenologically speaking, a ‘neglected presence’. Here, the deformity (in the case of Bonario) is brought to the fore by presenting the body as an embodiment of illegitimacy. This squares off the notion of performativity itself as the act immediately conveys the sense that the deed is done.

The exposition of the play kicks off with the projection of a body feigning sickness. The body in question is also suggestive of impotence which can be affirmed by the declaration of the body being ‘childless’. The bodily infirmities are immediately announced by the positioning of the body as ‘languishing’ on the stage. The politics of the body is affirmed by the staging of the “double process”—the simultaneous affirmation and deliberate rejection of the body on stage. The possibility of confirmation and rejection of the body by the spectator in the act of bastardization

of Bonario is an instance in point. The deviant or more specifically the ‘grotesque body’ (appropriating the term from Mikhail Bakhtin) is showcased through the projection of Volpone’s body while it is contested with another body that of Mosca’s which is again characterised by kleptoparasitism.

Role playing and disguises are the two characteristic features of performance and Volpone seems to excel in these traits. He is a master strategist who deploys his servant Mosca to do his biddings and to assist him in achieving his heartfelt desires. Mosca too becomes an interesting read because of his parasitic nature and this trait in turn endears him to Volpone quite unconditionally. The concept of role playing seems to take a completely different colour while considering Mosca’s performance because he not only plays the role of a parasite (one must note here the idea of a *performance-within-a-performance*) but engages the spectator’s attention to the performance of the body jostling with the double-process—while on the one hand, he is accepting the role of the parasite and on the other hand, he deliberately manipulates all other characters by gulling them with the physical infirmity of Volpone.

The play also becomes much more engaging because of the metamorphosis that takes place on the body of Androgyno. Metamorphosis on stage has to be quick and crafty because it renders substance not only to the performance but also to the body in action. There is however the risk of falling into the ‘distortive reception’<sup>4</sup> which can be quite fatal in terms of assessing the gravity and seriousness of the dramatic purpose. In *Volpone*, the body of Androgyno takes the form of the body of Pythagore which is a brilliant testimony to the idea of the double-process. Here, we find a deliberate rejection of the body on stage for the sake of another. Again,

the metamorphosis of the body of Pythagore to that of a dull mule and subsequently to that of an ass suggests the possibility of accepting multiple roles in the process of acting. The very act of embodiment is challenged as we neither grant the privilege nor entertain the notion that animals can have a ‘body’ too. Thus, it calls forth a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience.

An alternative approach can be taken in the consideration of the body in *Volpone*. It can be argued that in *Volpone*, the ‘transgressive body’ is presented through the character of Celia. Granted that Celia (along with Bonario) is the only “virtuous” character in the play that escapes the banter and vituperation of Jonson in terms of exposing the hypocrisy and pretentiousness of the then society, the very idea of body politics immediately ushers forth a contradictory perspective to examine Celia’s character in the light of being a transgressive body. The paradox of portrayal becomes more intensified when the characteristic features of Celia is contrasted with her rather ‘infidel’ act of observing Volpone disguised as a mountebank through the window. This act reveals the desire of the so-called ‘disciplined body’ of Celia which arguably enough seems to harbour carnal desires for Volpone. It also casts light on the failure of Corvino to adequately address the required conjugal bliss with Celia. If this perspective is taken into consideration, then, the body of Corvino faces conceptual annihilation from the spectral presence of the play as it becomes a foil to the other male body in question. Celia’s act of dropping the handkerchief can be seen as a sign of confirmation and admiration regarding the qualitative superiority of Volpone’s body to that of Corvino’s. Therefore, from the semiotic point of view, the act of dropping the handkerchief

illustrates the latent desire of the female body which has been hitherto suppressed by the limits of societal decorum.

What becomes more intriguing in theatre is that the performing body 'acts' as a 'text', the authorship and authenticity of which is in the process of perpetual flux. The gap between the actor/role and performer/performance offers a particular form of spectatorial pleasure and the audience in trying to address this conflict potential recognise that the actors are not just copying behavioural patterns of the characters but are performing in a way that accommodates a formal and aesthetic relationship. Corvino in his anger associates Volpone with satyrs—half goat and half human—symbolising carnal desire. The sexual connotation of this image is bolstered furthermore when Corvino accuses his wife Celia for harbouring the thought to 'mount' on Volpone. One must note that the use of the word 'mount' and its theatrical register connotes multiple meanings especially when the context of such accusation is sexually charged up. Corvino snatches all possible freedom and liberty that Celia previously had access to by drawing a line as a sign of restriction. This immediately brings in the popular idea of a "laxman-rekha" to the Indian readers.

Corv. ...And till 't be done, some two or three yards off

I'll chalk a line:...

To set thy desp'rate foot more hell, more horror,  
More wild remorseless rage shall seize on thee  
(2.2, 54)

The semiotic significance of this abstract referent 'laxman-rakha' also invites the strategic significance of the Indian subject position. This reference immediately conveys the fact that as Indians, we cannot 'dis-locate' ourselves while engaging in extricating the dynamics of

performance of a foreign text. If we regard the notion that bodies are cultural texts as true, we then have an opportunity in theatre to re-read/re-interpret these texts according to our own cultural conditioning. In short, the subject position of the reader/interpreter announces an *informal cultural embeddedness* (italics and phrase mine) which is much needed to sort out congenial ways of perception.

The social life of the Renaissance women is brilliantly fabricated in the play through the projection of the two female characters who are almost polar opposites—Celia the virtuous women and Lady Politic Would-Be the sophisticated opportunist. The scaling of heights in the rush for social status and recognition has been deftly presented by Jonson in the portrayal of Lady Politic who craves to make her mark in the Venetian aristocratic lifestyle by flaunting her sophisticated nature. On the contrary, Celia has been presented in the traditional light of an "angel in the house" (appropriating the term from Coventry Patmore). It is Lady Politic who accuses Celia for tempting Sir Politic by designating her as a "chameleon harlot" in front of the advocatori (4.1, 106). The chameleon metaphor indicates the idea of role playing, masking, deception and doubling—all significant characteristic of the body politic. Celia's body, although couched and conceived along traditional lines, is much more complicated to analyse and interpret because gender is a "regulatory fiction" (Judith Butler) which enforces and censors certain behaviour.

Theatre is thus fundamentally concerned with the body and this fact has hitherto served as a vantage point. The conceptual notion of the 'body' in theatre is necessarily abstract but it is an abstraction based on the idea of a fleshy, palpable reality. Through *Volpone*, Ben Jonson

is able to hold multiple characterisation and contextual relevance simultaneously. Thus, theatre with all its cultural baggage and contestation offers significant ways and means in the understanding of the 'body'.

### End Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The idea of 'selling' health is confirmed in Volpone's performance as a mountebank. He tries to prescribe and sell different sorts of medicines for different diseases like epilepsy, palpitation, kidney-stone, dysentery, paralysis, convulsions, cramps, vertigo and so on and so forth.

<sup>2</sup> Anabasis in drama means the rising of an action to a climax or denouement. For more specific details, see J.A.Cuddon's *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, London and New York: Penguin Books, (1992), 1999 rpt.

<sup>3</sup> The ethics of spectatorship chiefly comprise of the audience's *willing suspension of disbelief*. The audience comes to the theatre with the preconceived notion that all that is enacted on stage is a mere *representation* of reality and not reality itself.

<sup>4</sup> By the phrase 'distortive reception', I mean the kind of reception that is supposed to be nourished by the gaze of the spectator. If the metamorphosis enacted on the stage is not quick enough, it leaves the spectator baffled and puzzled regarding the very 'idea' of the act itself. This inability of the spectator in judging the viability of the performance gives rise to doubt which, if lingers more than usual, destroys the purposefulness of the act. In other words, the ethics of spectatorship is seriously threatened when the spectator fails to willfully suspend his disbelief.

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