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# GENDER, FAMILY, AND MORALITY IN BEN JONSON'S *VOLPONE*

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## ABSTRACT

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England, the transformation in categories of value resulting from a money economy clashed with older forms of institutionalized values. Ben Jonson's dramatic satire *Volpone* (1606) diagnoses social ills arising from the emerging proto-capitalist culture of his time. Though Jonson critiques the corrosive impact of a money culture, the two distinct embodiments of moral good in Jonson's play, Celia and Bonario, prove ineffective in battling the creeping value transformations associated with money. In part, their failure derives from systemic fissures in Early Modern understandings of the family unit and gendered roles within such a structure. Celia as wife and Bonario as eldest son and heir occupy distinct gendered family roles that hinder their respective abilities to combat eroding morals and encroaching economic change. My project combines a close reading of Celia and Bonario as dramatized in Jonson's play with a careful study of sixteenth-century conduct books that articulate understandings of the family unit and gender roles during a time of proto-capitalist transition.

## METHODOLOGY

**Close textual analysis:** Examines the specific components of a key passage of the text, such as word choice, definition, and rhythm, to enhance understanding of the work. Looks for underlying patterns and weighs the preponderance of evidence used for argumentation.

**New Historicism:** A critical theory that examines a work of literature within the context of the moment of history it was written in and looks at the power dynamics within a text.

- **16<sup>th</sup> century England:** A period of burgeoning proto-capitalist changes; began to emphasize the importance of the individual
- **Conduct books:** Provided instructions on how individuals ought to behave as members of a patriarchal, familial society; emphasized the individual as part of a community

## PROBLEMS WITH PROTO-CAPITALISM IN *VOLPONE*

- 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century: major economic change
- Population growth led to competition within the labor market; increasingly meritocratic economy
- Identity linked to one's value in the market
- Heightened emphasis on individuality; led to concerns over perceived threats to a divinely-ordained social hierarchy and to human relations
- *Volpone* echoes these concerns by depicting plots that involve endangered familial relations
  - ❖ Bonario's disinheritance for the sake of his father's greed
  - ❖ Jealous Corvino's willing prostitution of his wife to Volpone

## ANALYSIS

### Bonario, the firstborn male

#### His ineptitude

- Heir to a wealthy father, name means "good-natured"
- Speeches about morality
- However, is easily manipulated by the others' schemes (Act 3)

#### How traditional structures restrict his freedom to act

- Displays a strict adherence to the exacting and contradictory rules and societal norms of the old feudal culture wherein obedience to a parent is the basis of a child's morality
- "Sir, I will sit down, / And rather wish my innocence should suffer / Than I resist the authority of a father" (4.5.111).

Robert Cleaver, *A godly form of householde government* (1598):

- Children must "obey their Parents, and doo serve them, and also do feare, love, honour, and reverence them" (A3R).
- "Children have always to remember, that . . . when they disobey [their parents], they disobey God" (Aa3R)
- "Also children must be carefull to follow the good examples of their fathers" (Aa3V)

### Celia, the faithful wife

#### How strict patriarchal standards keep her in a vulnerable state

- Like Bonario, Celia displays a compliance with the virtues of an older England—one that expected a wife to obey her husband without question.
- Begs Corvino, her husband, for mercy, but never resists him
- "Sir, what you please, you may; I am your martyr" (3.7.107).

Edmund Tilney, *The Flower of Friendship* (1577):

- "For in nothing can a wife shewe a greater wisdom, than in dissembling with an importunate husbande. Her honestye, her good nature, and her praise is shewed in nothing more, then in tolerating of an indiscrete man: and to conclude, as the woman ought not to command the man but to be always obedient" (C2R)
- "For a good name is the flower of estimation, and the pearle of credite, which is so delicate a thing in a woman, that she must not onely be good, but likewise must appeare so" (C2V)
- "For disobedience is a fault in all persons, but the greatest vice in a woman" (D3R)

## CONCLUSIONS

The characters of Bonario and Celia in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* have traditionally disregarded by scholars for their inability and seeming unwillingness to combat evil. However, little thought has been given to *what* keeps them from being able to act. Bonario and Celia, though they occupy different positions in society, both demonstrate a morality based on the strict performance of one's role in a traditional patriarchal system. However, *Volpone* reveals that traditional morality fails the two characters as they fall prey to the circumstances other, far more degenerate characters create. This failure, *Volpone* demonstrates, stems from the fact that the success of the traditional model for the family and for society depended on the full participation of each individual member. Such a model, however, offers no solutions for the fight against evil when some members choose to act against their prescribed role in the family and in society. Bonario and Celia, then, demonstrate a clash between the tenets of a longheld and revered society, which emphasized the importance of the individual only as part of a larger community, and that of a nascent proto-capitalist culture, which sought to elevate the individual according to ability. *Volpone* does more than showcase the destructive nature of avarice and the ineffectiveness of morality against—it explores the conflict between the individual and the community and the clash between a traditional model of society and the dawn of a money-driven culture.

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