

**A CRITICAL EXPOSITION OF THE NATURE AND MANIFESTATIONS OF
CORRUPTION IN BEN JONSON'S *VOLPONE***

Dr. Maryisabella Ada Ezeh

Department of Theater and Film Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT: *Corruption is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which characterize the global economy and has different manifestations. To respond to this global challenge, a multidisciplinary approach is crucial in enforcement, investigation and prevention and it is a proven fact that public awareness/education is very critical in prevention. The use of drama to raise awareness and consciousness is very ancient and evident in all types of drama-traditional and modern. This study examines the relationship between drama and public awareness. It reviews the role dramatists have played in the fight against corruption. The nature, types and punishment for corruption as manifested in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* is also evaluated. It is established that drama has played and still has a key role to play in the prevention of corruption.*

KEYWORDS: Ben Jonson, Drama, Corruption, *Volpone*

INTRODUCTION

Corruption is an “insidious plague that has a wide range of corrosive effects on societies. It is considered as one of the greatest challenges of the contemporary world. It undermines democracy and good governance, erodes the quality of life and allows organized crime, terrorism and other threats to human security to flourish”¹. Corruption is found in all countries of the world- developing and developed, hence to prevent and combat corruption effectively; a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach is needed. The prevention and eradication of corruption is a responsibility of all, and requires cooperation, support and involvement if efforts are to be effective. The foregoing realization led to the following questions: first, where is the role of drama in this grand design and secondly, what role has drama and dramatists played in the prevention of these crimes. Chapter II, Article 6 (1b) of United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) states that, “ Each state party shall in accordance with the fundamental principles of its legal system ensure the existence of a body or bodies, as appropriate that prevent corruption by such means as: increasing and disseminating knowledge about the prevention of corruption”.² Consequently the legal regimes of Anticorruption Agencies (ACAs) of various countries acknowledge the need for these agencies to raise public awareness about corruption and its impact on the society.

The use of drama to create awareness is very ancient and evident in all types of drama-traditional and modern because dramatists from the Classical to the Contemporary period have continued to illuminate the social problems of their society. Prevailing social problems are issues of serious concern which get expository attention in their works. As Emeka Nwabueze, a Nigerian Professor of Theater Studies puts it:

Dramatists like other artists are involved in tackling the problems inherent in their society. The committed artist must engage in using his art to make his audience conscious of shortcomings

of his society. He is like a referee who tries to correct those that violate the rules of the game, the game of life. The Playwrights hit the crucial targets in order to enlighten the people and make them aware of their situation in society.³

Dramatists have remained committed to the cause of social reform. They use their plays as avenues to give exposition to the experiences, values and social realities of their society. Yetunde Akorede rightly observes that: “The relevance of the dramatist is determined by the usefulness of the role he plays in the portrayal of socio political realities of his time. The committed playwright is the conscience of his people and it falls on him to make them aware of their problems, the causes and the possible cure for such problems”.⁴

Drama is as entertaining as well as it is educative and informative. It is highly regarded as a mode of communication because it is based on the human being as the chief resource hence behavior change is possible. The role of drama in a corrupt society cannot be overemphasized due to its importance in information through enactment. Berrigan notes that, “

While people can gain information from non-personal sources such as radio, TV and the press, research has shown that such information leads only a few to change behavior. People learn best from interpersonal contact. It is for this reason that development workers in their search for an appropriate interpersonal communication search, view drama as a medium that can have impact.⁵

The reason for the belief in the effectiveness of drama is that, as entertainment drama is able to hold the attention of many people, and as a dramatic way of presenting problems, it makes the audience see these problems in a fresh and critical way. Therefore, drama is a potent instrument of change. This work aims to examine the matter and manner of awareness of corruption raised in Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*.

The Nature of Corruption and the Global Campaign Against Corruption

Corruption has no single definition. Attempts have been made by some political philosophers to define corruption within their socio-cultural milieu. As Seumas Miller, Peter Roberts and Edward Spenser pointed out, “In the light of the diverse range of corrupt actions and of the generic nature of the concept of corruption, it is unlikely that any precise definition is possible; (...) This explains the futility or at least limitations of narrow definitions such as that of corruption as abuse of power by a public official for private gain”.⁶ However, a common thread to the definition of corruption is that it is detestable, despicable and absolutely condemnable by everybody in the society. Proverbially, corruption is any action undertaken by anybody with a view to reaping where one has not sown. Corruption can be generally described as any dishonest action or inaction by any person to derive any form of illegitimate, illicit, immoral or unethical advantage.

One of the factors that causes or tends to bring it into existence or maintain corruption is the moral environment which consists of a socio-moral context in which corrupt activities can take place. Second, is the desire of unfair advantage because many people are motivated to engage in corrupt activities because of the inherently selfish desire to have an unfair advantage over

others. Corruption manifests in different forms namely Fraud, Bribery, Collusion, Making False Statements, etc.

Corruption has indeed since become a cankerworm that is eating deep into the fabric of human society and has been identified as an important problem that needs to be addressed, and in particular requiring internationally agreed solutions. International Anticorruption Conventions play a key role in the global campaign against corruption. They play a crucial role and set legally binding standards and principles by which signatory States can be held accountable. The statutes also support both domestic action and international cooperation needed to tackle the many facets of corruption. Conventions vary depending on their signatories, specific obligations which could be concrete recommendations for actions or general political commitments that form the basis for steps to be taken. Some conventions aspire to a global coverage, while others have a regional focus depending on their geographical scope. The following is a tabulated form of the most popular global and regional conventions.

TABLE 1: INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL ANTICORRUPTION CONVENTIONS

S/N	YEAR	INSTRUMENT NAME	COMMON USAGE
1.	1996	Inter-American Convention Against Corruption	OAS Convention
2.	1997	Organization For Economic Cooperation and Development Convention on Combating Corruption	OECD Convention
3.	1999	Council of Europe Criminal Law Convention on Corruption	COE Criminal Law convention
4.	1999	Council of Europe Civil Law Convention on Corruption	COE Civil Law Convention
5.	2000	United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime	UNTOC
6.	2003	African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption	AU Convention
7.	2003	United Nations Convention Against Corruption	UNCAC

Of the foregoing, only UNCAC has a global coverage. UNCAC is an international treaty aspiring to universal participation that bans corruption and obliges signatory states to take a variety of measures to fight corruption. It calls for preventive measures and the criminalization of the most prevalent forms of corruption. UNCAC also makes a major breakthrough by requiring Member States to return assets obtained through corruption to the country from which they were stolen. Consequently, signatory countries must commit to prevent and criminalize corruption; they must openly co-operate with one another in cases of cross border corruption activities and must also work with one another to return stolen assets.

The range of Anticorruption instruments and convention today are a reflection of an international consensus that emerged in the early 1990s. It is important to point out that whereas the issues of corruption started receiving serious attention in the affairs of the world in the twentieth century, it has been explored in the theater from the Classical through to the contemporary period. Critics and satirists in all ages have always seen their duty, as

improvement of man's behavior by exposing the moral inadequacies of man, thereby making him change for the better so as to be acceptable in the society. Notable names like Aristophanes, Horace and Juvenal in the Classical age; Paulus Diaconus in the Middle Age; Cervantes in the early seventeenth century Spain, Ben Jonson and John Dryden in the Elizabethan age, G.B. Shaw and T.S. Elliot in the twentieth century and a host of others have written to criticize, attack or ridicule societal problems in order to correct them. An attempt will be made to analyze how Ben Jonson has effectively employed the basic elements of drama to project his views and comment on the social realities of his Elizabethan society. The study will dwell on the major characters and situations in the play used to explore the issues of corruption in *Volpone*.

A Critical Exposition of the Nature and Manifestations of Corruption in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*

Synopsis of *Volpone*

Volpone, a single and aging Venetian has for 3 years feigned sickness to encourage legacy hunters to bring gifts in the hope of inheriting his fortune. With the help of his servant Mosca, *Volpone* defrauds his victims- Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino extracting their wealth by feeding their greed. The legacy hunters are not only prepared to sacrifice their own wealth in the expectation of getting it back later, what is despicable about them is that they are willing to compromise their own values, families and relationships. Corbaccio, for instance is talked into disinheriting his son, while Corvino, a very possessive husband is driven by greed to offer Celia his wife to sleep with *Volpone*. *Volpone* tries to rape Celia and is stopped only by the appearance of Bonario. Celia and Bonario brings charges against *Volpone* in court, but the table turns against them when countercharges of adultery and fornication are laid against them by the legacy hunters- Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino and Lady Politik. *Volpone* gets tired of the scheme, decides to fake his death and bequeaths his wealth to Mosca. Desperate not to be outsmarted by his servant Mosca, *Volpone* reveals himself and exposes everybody's guilt.

The prologue of the play asserts that the play attempts to mix profit with pleasure underlying Jonson's intention that his play will instruct as it entertains. This is in line with Hary Harper's opinion that, "The dramatist should not only offer pleasure but should beside that be a preacher of morality and political adviser".⁷ *Volpone* is a powerful moral study of the nature, manifestations and punishment for corruption. The play mirrors some of the causes of corruption: desire for unfair advantage and moral environment. The success of *Volpone* is due to the greed of victims who want to reap where they did not sow. Jonson highlights people's tendency to deceive others out of greed and vanity. The following excerpt from the conversation between *Volpone* and Mosca clearly supports the above:

VOLPONE: I have no wife, parent, child, ally
 To give my substance to; but whom I make
 Must my heir be; and this makes men observe me:
 This draws new clients daily to my house,
 Women and men of every sex and age,
 That bring me presents, send me plate, coin, jewels
 With hope that when I die (which they expect
 Each greedy minute) it shall return

Tenfold upon them; whilst some, covetous
 Above the rest, seek to engross me whole,
 And counter-work the one unto the other,
 Contend in gifts, as they would seem in love:
 All which I suffer, playing with their hopes'
 And am content to coin them into profit,
 And look on that; still bearing them in hand,
 Letting the cherry knock against their lips,
 And draw it by their mouths, and back again.⁸

Volpone is set in Venice. The Venice of the Renaissance was viewed abroad as the citadel of greed and corruption, infamous for its vice-ridden inhabitants and decadence. Consequently, there was a very high level of tolerance of corruption within the moral environment. Thus, the play strives to create awareness of the excesses and immoralities of people at all levels of society and the heights of corruption in Jonson's society.

The many concerns of the play apart from the causes of corruption include x-raying the many manifestations of corruption namely Fraud, Bribery, Collusion, Making False Statement and the Punishment for Corruption. Fraud is a representation made to obtain unfair advantage by giving or receiving false or misleading information. Typically, acts of Fraud are said to possess the following features according to Seumas Miller, Peter Roberts and Edward Spenser, "First, fraud involves providing oneself with a financial benefit; second, the financial benefit in question is one that the fraudster is not entitled to; and third, the means by which the benefit is secured involves deception".⁹ The opening of the play reveals that Volpone gained his wealth through fraud:

VOLPONE: True, my beloved Mosca, Yet I glory
 More in cunning purchase of my wealth'
 Than in the glad possession, since I gain
 No common way; I use no trade, no venture;
 I wound no earth with ploughshares, fat no beasts
 To feed the shambles; have no mills for iron
 Oil, corn, or men to grind them into powder:
 I blow no subtle glass, expose no ships
 To threat'nings of the furrow-faced sea;
 I turn no monies in the public bank,
 No usurer private.¹⁰

The import of the above speech highlights that Volpone gained his wealth neither through any hard work nor honest means but through fraud like he called it 'cunning purchase'.

The play *Volpone* set the tempo for awareness of bribery as a manifestation of corruption. Bribery is the act of offering someone money, services, or other inducements to persuade him or her to do something in return. The quest for personal gain is at the root of bribery. The legacy hunters are more interested in amassing more wealth; they are prepared to bribe Volpone in the expectations of being named as his beneficiary. It is on the victims' vain conviction of their own privileges and rewards that the fraudster plays. Mosca's observation concerning Voltore stresses the above.

MOSCA: I cannot choose sir, when I apprehend
 What thoughts he has without now, as he walks;
 That this might be the last gift he should give;
 That this would fetch him; if you died today'
 And gave him all, what he should be tomorrow;
 What large return would come of all his ventures;
 How he should worshipped be, and reverenced;
 Ride with furs, and foot-cloths; waited on
 By herds of fool and clients; have clear way
 Made for his mule, as lettered as himself;
 Be called the great and learned advocate;
 And then concludes, there's nought impossible. ¹¹

Mosca is shown not only to be a villain but he is also exposed as the real evil. He is the master planner, schemer and implementer of the strategies. In fact, Mosca is the trickster. The play *Volpone*, stresses collusion as a strong manifestation of corruption. Collusion is an arrangement between two or more persons designed to achieve an improper purpose including to influence improperly the action of another person(s). It is evident that without Mosca's efforts, Volpone would not have succeeded. Volpone feigns sickness and therefore inactive through the course of the play, all the fraudulent actions were implemented by Mosca: conviction of the legacy hunter of being Volpone's heir and beneficiary; hoodwinking of Corbaccio into making Volpone his heir in the belief that it will eventually come back to him and his son, tricking Corvino, a very possessive husband to offer his wife Celia to sleep with Volpone. Mosca's crucial role is evident in the following speech:

1st AVOCATORE (To Mosca) Stand forth; and first the parasite you appear
 T' have been the chiefest minister, if not plotter,
 In all these lewd imposture...¹²

Jonson also highlights the corruption of the legal process. Testimony in court is expected to be presented truthfully, thus to present fabricated evidence, to lie on oath are all corrupt practices. Making false statements- deliberately falsifying or altering evidence in order to impede or influence the investigations of allegations of a corrupt act is another form of corruption exposed in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. The legacy hunters: Corbaccio, Corvino, Voltore and Lady Politik all lied in court against Bonario and Celia in order to frustrate the prosecution and investigation of the charges of rape brought against Volpone in court. Many forms of corruption involve

financial transaction and are motivated by a desire for financial gain. But many do not involve money and are not motivated by money, for instance, sexual gratification. In view of this, Volpone desiring to have Celia and trying to rape her is an act of corruption. However, The foursome presented false statements of fornication and adultery against Bonario and Celia so as to turn the table against them.

Jonson attacks avarice and obsession with wealth in *Volpone* through his naming system. Volpone introduces his victims as:

VOLPONE: Now, now my clients
 Begin their visitation! Vulture, Kite
 Raven, and gorcrow, all my birds of prey...¹³

He refers to them as ‘birds of prey’. Mosca, the parasite means one who feeds off on other people and Volpone, the Fox is a symbol of cunningness and trickery. The Naming system further reflects the corrupt nature of characters in the play.

The plays thematic concern is not only wrapped around the causes and manifestations of corruption but also the punishment for corruption. Over the ages, drama has been used to criticize, suggest ideals and propose solution to problems. It is trusted as effective in effecting change and revered as balanced, neutral, fair and ideal. This is why the committed writer in Toni Duruaku’s view, “tries to expose the ills of that society to show how ugly and therefore reprehensible they are. He extols virtues and condemns vice. He seeks to make society better”.¹⁴ Commitment to change, intervention and remediation is among the many functions of the dramatists.

Jonson metes out punishment to his characters according to their crimes. Volpone’s wealth is confiscated and he is sentenced to life imprisonment; Mosca is condemned to life as a gallery slave; Voltore is disbarred from the legal practice; Corbaccio stripped of all his property and Corvino sentenced to public humiliation. On the other hand, Bonario and Celia are free, Bonario is now in possession of his father’s estate and Celia is sent back to her parents with her dowry trebled. The following excerpts are from the judge’s pronouncements on Mosca and Volpone:

1st AVOCATORE (To Mosca) ... For which our sentence is, thou be whipt;
 Then live a perpetual prisoner in our galleys.
 And (To Volpone) ... But our judgment on thee
 Is, that thy substance all be straight confiscate
 To the hospital of the Incurabili(...)
 And since the most was gotten by impostures
 By feigning lame, gout, palsy, and such diseases;
 Thou art to lie in prison, cramp’d with irons,
 Till thou be’st sick and lame indeed. ¹⁵

Succinctly, the play shows the reward of corruption. Ben Jonson hit the crucial target in order to enlighten the people and make them aware of the situation in the society. He incorporates

aspects of lived realities and raises the consciousness of people on aspects of life like corruption in the society. In this way, drama provides a viable tool in social consciousness. Bode Osayin asserts that, “Through the application of poetic justice drama makes clear the vision of the ideal society which all must aspire to attain”.¹⁶

That is why 1st Avocatore concludes:

1st AVOCATORE: Let all that see these vices thus rewarded
 Take heart, and love to study’em. Mischief feeds
 Like beasts, till they be fat, and then they bleed.¹⁷

Today, seizure of proceeds of crime, imprisonment, revocation and withdrawal of operational powers and licenses etc. form part of the sanctions for corrupt acts and serve as major deterrents to corrupt practices.

CONCLUSION

Corruption is pervasive in scope, destructive in effect and unquantifiable in terms of its economic, political and social costs. It is a crime that affects everybody day-by-day in our daily lives and its victims include individuals, societies and states. The fact that no society since the beginning of creation has been free of corruption shows that the challenge man feels is very overwhelming hence the need for a multidisciplinary approach to combatting corruption. The connection between art and society gives drama power and credence over all other forms in the quest for a reformed society. Over the years, drama has been used not just for entertainment but also for moral teachings, development and the alteration of social consciousness. The dramatist aims through his works to expose social realities in order to keep the masses abreast of the workings and happenings in their society, which is a necessity for social reform. The effect of such dramatic presentation is to create awareness and jolt members into taking necessary measures for reformation of the society.

In *Volpone*, Ben Jonson creates awareness of the nature, causes and manifestations of corruption and takes measures to reveal the punishment for corruption. He used his satirical wit to skewer the excesses and pretensions of people at all levels of the society including other writers. *Volpone* is a direct attack on the viciousness of the human race. Jonson sets out to undermine the notion of avarice and vice. Volpone and his victims are all concerned with amassing more wealth and succumbed to their selfish desires but in the end, the scam is discovered and the ‘birds of prey’ with Mosca and Volpone are punished in a way that reflects their vices. Bode Osayin rightly avers that the, “Writer fights with his pen, his writings communicate ideas to the public (...)”.¹⁸

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