

The Circle Pattern in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*

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The image of the circle is a unifying motif in Ben Jonson's works.¹ In his masques, it stands for harmony and perfection, realm, marriage, dance and cosmos, and its centre represents reason and the King in a propagandistic, conservative celebration of monarchy. In his poetry, the circle and sphere of perfection are also present, but the centre becomes more important as it stands for, on the one hand, Jonson's anxieties over the misrepresentation of his character and opinions by others and his fear of self-exposure, and, on the other hand, the virtues that he wished to possess and praised in others: self-assuredness, inner stability, and the Stoic detachment and isolation from the problems and trials that the outside world poses. In his plays, Jonson not only introduces the occasional circle image, he also structures them following a pattern consisting in the creation of different concentric levels of 'performance' and 'audience' within the play and reflecting the contemporary view of the universe as structured in concentric spheres or circles.

In *Volpone; or, The Fox* (1605), the circle image is not only explicit in a couple of instances, but it is also implicit in the behaviour of the characters that bear bird names, and in the above-mentioned usual Jonsonian pattern. These elements are interdependent and reinforce one another, making the circle, as I say, the unifying image of the play. Nevertheless, besides the varying degree of explicitness and clarity there is also a difference as to the importance of the function of these elements. Jonson uses the last two as general structuring principles of his satirical play while he employs rather concrete circle images to illustrate specific points of detail in the plot.

Thus, Jonson uses the actions of the 'bird' characters to show and criticize two vices: greed and folly, that is to say, he chooses these emblematic birds to indicate *what* he satirizes and the circle that they describe around their respective victims serves as the link with the other major structural image. The second image is the division of the play in different concentric levels of theatricality in correspondence with the contemporary Ptolemaic structure of the universe. This parallelism serves Jonson to write his satire; it shows *how* Jonson establishes the dramatic irony within the play and the satirical detachment of the audience.

These two general images are, of course, more important than the individual images; a quite clear reference to the world-view in *Volpone*'s address to his gold at the outset of the play and Corvino's metaphor involving the sorcerer's circle to stress his threats to Celia. For clarity's sake, I will follow this order of importance in my discussion.

In the main plot, the relationship between *Volpone* and the legacy-hunters is based on the behaviour and ingenuity that folklore ascribes to the fox in medieval bestiaries,² that is, the belief that the fox, when pressed by hunger, feigns to be dead in order to draw the attention of carrion birds

¹ For the overall importance of the circle in Jonson's production, I am especially indebted to Thomas M. Greene's "Ben Jonson and the Centered Self" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 10 (1970): 325-48 and the discussion on "Epistle Answering One that Asked to Be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben" (*Underwood*, XLVII) in William E. Cain "Self and Others in Two Poems by Ben Jonson" *Studies in Philology* 80 (1983): 163-82.

² See, for example, the text below Figure 1.

opposite figure to Volpone- is outsmarted by the newcomer that has entered the orbit around the Venetian centre of corruption. The inversion in the subplot of *Volpone* corresponds in fact to the inversion that we also find in Jonson's epigram, for in the poem he reverses the rôles or meanings he attributes in his poetry to the centre and the surrounding circle. Usually, the circle represents the outside world from which the wise man must distance and detach in order to retire to the centre, which stands for the Stoic ideals of the assertiveness, balance, and imperviousness of the inner-self, either desired for or achieved by the poet himself or the friends for whom he writes his eulogistic poems.⁵

Quite clearly then, the circle image as associated to the behaviour of animals, especially birds, is the foundations upon which Jonson builds his characters' motivations and relationships both in the main plot and in the subplot. The difference between them being that the circle in the main plot is centred on greed and its eventual punishment and the one of the subplot is focused on stupidity and its scourging.

However, these are not the only circles that become seminal for the plot-building and the satirical content of the play, since concentric circles as a bidimensional representation of the Elizabethan world-view were Jonson's masterplan for the modelling of the main elements -other than the criticism of vices- that make a play a satirical piece; to wit: dramatic irony, the need for and inducing of the audience's distance and detachment from the characters, and the stress on the theatricality of society.

In contemporary representations of the Ptolemaic world-view (Figure 2) we can see that the Earth occupies its centre and it is surrounded by several concentric circles which actually stand for the crystalline spheres where each planet is inset: first the seven planets (the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, the Sun, Jupiter and Saturn), then the fixed stars and finally the Empyreum or God's abode where He lives with the angelic hierarchies and the good souls that have achieved salvation.

Jonson uses this pattern to structure most of the scenes in his plays and *Volpone* is not an exception. Jonson always places a character as the centre or focal point of the action. In most cases, that particular character performs some kind of show or behaves in a way that can be best labelled as theatrical or even as a play-within-the-play.⁶ Then other characters watch this action and offer

⁵ In most cases, Jonson uses the centre image when talking about himself and other male, living friends, and uses the circle and the spheres to indicate perfection when writing about defunct personages, marriages or the King.. This significative difference, apart from showing the typical disregard for women as real or potential wise individuals, is easily explained if we bear in mind that the soul or mind is the innermost part of the self and it can be said to be lodged within the body (either in the heart or in the brain) as if it were the centre within the circle; circles and spheres related to marriages and the King stand for perfection and harmony in conjugal life and government, respectively; as to the connection between circles and spheres and immortality, according to early seventeenth-century beliefs, when the soul leaves the too-too solid flesh, it sets off on a journey through the different spheres that form the universe up to the *Coelum Empyreum* (heaven) where God himself lives together with the angels and the good souls. For this contrast see, for poems with an emphasis on the centre: *Epigrams: XCVIII To Sir Thomas Roe; CVI To Sir Edward Herbert; CXXVIII To William Roe; The Forest: XII Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland; XIV An Epistle to Master John Selden; The Underwoods: XXV An Ode to James, Earl of Desmond; XXX An Epigram on William, Lord Bur[leigh], Lor[rd] High Treasurer of England; XLV An Epistle answering to One that Asked to be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben; LII (A Poem Sent Me by Sir William Burlase); Miscellaneous Poems: I To Thomas Palmer.* For poems in which circles and spheres stand for perfection see: *The Forest: XLVIII The Dedication of the King's New Cellar. To Bacchus; LXVIII An Epigram. To the Household. 1630; LXX To the Immortal Memory and Friendship of that Noble Pair, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison; LXXV Epithalamion; LXXXI On the King's Birthday; LXXXIII An Elegy on the Lady Jane Pawlet, Marchion[ess] of Winton; LXXXIV Eupheme; Miscellaneous Poems: XV To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr William Shakespeare: And What He Hath Left Us; XVIII The Vision of Ben Jonson, on the Muses of His Friend M. Drayton; XXIV; XXIX Epitaph on Katherine, Lady Ogle; Odes: XXXI Ode Enthusiastic; XXXII Ode Allegoric; XXXIV Ode; LIX; LXXXIII; LXXXVIII; XCVII; Other Miscellaneous Poems: CVII A Song of Welcome to King Charles; CVIII A Song of the Moon; CX (A Panegyre, on the Happy Entrance of James, Our Sovereign, to His First High Session of Parliament in This Kingdom, the 19 of March, 1603; CXXIV The Reverse on the Back Side.*

⁶ In *Mirror within a Mirror: Ben Jonson and the Play-within*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature 46 (Salzburg, Institut für englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1975) 16-18, Robert W. Witt includes the observation of some characters by others among the varieties of the play-within-the-play in Jonson's drama: "Another such situation occurs when one character or group of characters in the play observes another character or group of characters. (...) [A] play reflects life and life is a play, it follows that a play should reflect a play. This, it seems, is the effect Jonson works for in his plays, particularly the comedies.

commentaries about it to other characters in the play. Thus, the centre is surrounded, so to speak, by two concentric circles or levels that correspond to the 'presenter' or 'interpreter' of the action and its 'audience'. Some scenes show an even more complex structure as they offer supplementary circles that add intermediate levels to this relationship between 'action' and 'audience'. Moreover, in some of his plays Jonson employs inductions and choruses that constitute another commenting audience with characters alien to the play proper interposed between us, the very outer limit in this structure, and the play in order to guide our reception of the play.⁷

This association between the theatricality in Jonson's plays and the contemporary world-view represented as a series of concentric circles may seem somewhat far-fetched, but Jonson explicits it in the prologue to *Cynthia's Revels*, where he identifies the audience with the outer sphere surrounding the central action on stage and the spectators are asked to grant his play their understanding and respect in the form of a crown, another circular shape which becomes concentric to the audience as the play is its very centre (the italics are mine):

*If gracious silence, sweet attention,
Quick sigh, and quicker apprehension,
The lights of judgment's throne, shine any where,
Our doubtful author hopes this is their sphere;*
And therefore opens he himself to those, 5
To other weaker beams his labours close,
As loth to prostitute their virgin-strain,
To every vulgar and adulterate brain.
In this alone, his Muse her sweetness hath,
She shuns the print of any beaten path; 10
And proves new ways to come to learned ears:
Pied ignorance she neither loves nor fears.
Nor hunts she after popular applause,
Or foamy praise, that drops from common jaws:
The garland that she wears, their hands must twine, 15
Who can both censure, understand, define
What merit is: *then cast those piercing rays,
Round as a crown, instead of honour's bays,
About his poesy; which, he knows, affords
Words, above action; matter, above words.*

The structure in concentric levels of action remains the same for much of Jonson's plays, however, there is a shift of characters occupying the centre as they abandon and recover their positions as the centre of the play. As this device combines with the linear progression of the different part of the play, i. e., the protasis, epitasis, catastasis and catastrophe, we also find that those elements that used to be the centre of the play occupy a more marginal position in the pattern.

In *Volpone*, the eponymous character is the centre or focal point of most of the play as he does the 'acting', Mosca is the interpreter that manipulates the legacy-hunters and the latter form the gullible audience who believes what it sees and hears. In the subplot, Sir Pol is both the centre and the self-presenter and Peregrine his audience and his critic in his asides.

Each consists of a series of plays-within which are produced by some of the characters while other characters observe them, and this effect seems to represent Jonson's view of life - a theatre in which a play is in progress in which a play is in progress."

⁷ *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), *The Staple of News* (1626) and *The Magnetic Lady* (1632) include both induction and chorus, while *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) has an induction. *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) has a sort of frame structure (1. 1. and 5. 4.).

Later, these starting relationships are inverted and reversed back again at a devilish pace as we see that Volpone leaves the centre for an audience position in an exterior circle, while Mosca occupies the centre briefly, just until Volpone ends the game by regaining the centre and provoking the collapse of this little microcosm of deceit by giving away himself and all the others. In the subplot, Peregrine becomes the centre as he plays his trick on Sirj Pol, but then Sir Pol becomes the centre of attention as he dons his caparison.

This manipulation of both the characters and the audience's attention can be best termed as a game with centripetal and centrifugal projection, in other words, how the play is devised to produce the audience's engagement with and detachment from the play and its characters. We, as spectators, engage in the action, we are drawn towards the centre, when we pay attention to the character that becomes the focal point of the play, and we detach and distance from this centre in a psychological centrifugal movement when the other levels of action, commentary, and audience intervene and modify our reception of the play.

This double-way projection is the basis of Jonson's elements of satire for, in this way, he is able to achieve dramatic irony. We, as spectators, are aware of the manipulative nature of some characters, therefore, we know something the gulled characters ignore; we become, if not accomplices, at least, dumb witnesses of the delinquents' activities. Dramatic irony produces our distancing and detachment from the characters as we watch the play. Jonson prevents our identification with the cheaters and certainly creates a wide gap between us, the audience, and the foolish and vicious characters.

Actually, Jonson creates what Bertolt Brecht calls *Verfremdungseffekt* or Alienation effect. His plays share aspects with Brecht's theory of alienation in drama. Jonson tries to avoid the audience's empathy with the characters, he guides our reception of the play through the commentaries of the 'audience' of the main action, he provides the dramatic distance stressing the fictional character of the play, not by means of the actors' self-conscious performance -this is a difference with Brecht- but by resorting to dramatic self-consciousness within the play. Jonson relies on a very episodic structure of plays, something Brecht also recommended and referred to as 'plays within the play' for they also reproduced the protasis, epitasis, and catastrophe sequence of a play at large, but Jonson goes beyond this as he not only uses this episodic structure but also stresses the theatricality of these scenes by providing audiences that comment on them and influence the real spectators. Jonson transforms most of his scenes into practical plays-within-the-play and some of them really fall under this category since the characters watch plays, masques, or puppet shows. This creates what I call the theatrical paradox that, on the one hand, makes the spectators of those shows more real, closer to our level of reality, and, on the other hand, stresses that we are actually seeing a work of fiction.⁸

So much for the two main images of the play. As regards to the specific images, apart from the odd references to Fortune and her wheel, Jonson includes two more examples of circle imagery. These correspond, as I said before, to 1. 1., the first fourteen lines of Volpone's salutation to his gold, and 2. 5. 47-56 in which Corvino refers to the conjurer's circle.

Together with Volpone's subversion of religion, the first text links with and foregrounds the general use of the Ptolemaic world-view to structure the play, for Volpone refers to himself as the Earth and he identifies gold with the Sun. That is, here we find the identification of Volpone with the centre or focal point of the microcosm of corruption and folly which Venice represents. Besides, if we take into account that the alchemichal and astrological symbols for gold and the Sun were the same, i. e., a circle with a dot in its centre: we will realize that the analogy between gold and the Sun is another way of underlining the image of the circle. On the other hand, Volpone's mistake on locating darkness in the Earth, the centre of the Universe, hence, himself, indicates both the

⁸ See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and transl. by John Willett (London, Methuen, 1964, rptd. as a pbk. in 1990). The relevant pieces to my discussion are: "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting", 91-9; "The Street Scene", 121-9, esp. 125 and 126; "A Short Description of A New Technique of Acting. Appendix [selected notes] 17. The A-Effect as a Procedure in Everyday Life", 143-5; "A Short Organum for the Theatre", §§ 66-68, 201-2.

corruption of this world and his own personal corruption and also foretells his destiny at the end of the play.

In the second instance of explicit circle images, Corvino uses the image of the sorcerer who accidentally leaves the protection of his circle when invoking a devil to add dramatism to his menaces to Celia. It offers, again, a link with the general recurrent image, but it also makes us think that Corvino is a very devil himself that will destroy Celia if she dares venture beyond the limits of her incarceration, in other words, if she dares disrupt Corvino's orderly household world centred on her possession and control. Thus, again, we find Corvino in another outer level from which he is intent on exercising his power in order to get a hold of the centre.

So far I have centred my discussion of *Volpone* on the text of the play in connection with Jonson's contemporary culture. Now, I would like to transcend these limits and support my views focusing on a stage production for, indeed, 'the play is the thing'.

In the 1995 Royal National Theatre production of *Volpone*, directed by Matthew Warchus, the circle pattern of the play was actually emphasized and substantiated with the set and stage design. The stage of the Olivier Theatre is divided in revolving, concentric, circular sections. Every time the setting changed, the stage sections rotated. Those characters that became the focal point of each scene occupied the inner central section, while those who represent the first and successive circles in a centrifugal direction were situated in the outer areas. Perhaps this was not the purposeful result of a deep understanding of Jonson's works and their relationship to seventeenth-century culture, but a happy coincidence deriving from making use of the special characteristics of the stage. At any rate, I think this production is thoroughly useful to illustrate my point.

In Figure 4, Venetian guards chase Volpone and Mosca in an added introductory dumb-show which owes much to the Venetian Carnival and Milos Forman's *Amadeus* film. This was a fast moving scene in which the characters ran at full speed while the stage rotated thus creating a fine 'paradoxical' effect, for the actors ran across different rooms and corridors corresponding to the outer circles of the set, but at the same time they always remained in full view of the audience, on the same spot.

In Figure 5, Volpone, being the very centre of the main plot, is surrounded by his riches as well as Mosca, Nano, Castrone and Androgyno, who form a circle or outer level around him on his bed, which occupies the inner circle of the stage.

Figure 6 shows Celia and Bonario's trial at the Scrutineo. The two good-natured characters are in the abstract centre of the scene as they are the defendants. Voltore, although placed in the physical focal point of the scene and picture in fact represents an outer circle since he prosecutes the case against them. He is what I have termed as 'presenter', the intermediary between the centre of attention and the audience within the play that listens to him attentively (see Appendix). Corbaccio, bespectacled, with a white beard and wearing a helmet with a primitive hearing-aid that indicates his deafness, Corvino, in black, sitting next to Corbaccio, and Mosca, dressed like a Magnifico to Corbaccio's right, know all about Voltore's lies. We are also in the secret, therefore, we find an evident example of dramatic irony. These characters are placed, so to speak, on a different level or circle in the play. The Avocatori and the Notarios are farther away in even more distant circles if you notice the division of the stage floor in different areas which is much clearer in this photograph than in the preceding ones. Also, Volpone, disguised as a Commandatore and standing almost in complete darkness next to Mosca, occupies the outer circle of the scene.

Whether by chance or quite consciously, in my opinion, Matthew Warchus's production succeeded in offering a really entertaining spectacle coupled with an illustration of Jonson's underlying analogy.

Analogy, indeed. As I believe to have proved, the circle is the figure that Jonson uses to bind together very different elements, aspects and materials: emblematic animal behaviour, which points to sources such as classical fable and medieval bestiaries and *fabliaux*, the contemporary world-view, dramatic satire and some of its most typical constituents: dramatic irony, distance and detachment, theatricality and dramatic self-consciousness.

Actually, this union of such disparate ideas and images is not that far from the metaphysical sensibility. Jonson also shows wit in associating the general with the particular. This is as Samuel Johnson held: "a kind of *discordia concors*, a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike". In *Volpone*, as we have seen, "the most heterogenous ideas are yoked by violence together" as well.⁹

The conclusion is quite simple then. The circle in *Volpone* is a conceit that informs the whole play. *Volpone* can be defined as a 'metaphysical play', not because of the imagery that Jonson puts in his characters' mouths, for it is quite reasonably clear and sparse, but because the play is in fact a quite elaborate association of elements with the circle as its key. Thus, *Volpone* shares much with John Donne's poem *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning* in which the circle also provides the links in the chain of ideas and images. The difference is that while Donne's text is a poem just thirty-six lines long, Jonson's is a five-act play. The varying degree of concentration is what misleads us into considering both works as being wide apart and very dissimilar. In Donne's poem the conceit density is so high that its presence is evident and it even proves to be an overdose for some readers. However, in Jonson's play the conceits are so diluted that the play resembles one of those nice homeopathic remedies. Allegedly, the active principle is there, but actually we cannot see it or even taste it. This dilution, I am afraid, will also make you think that my views about *Volpone* are a sort of mountebank's empty perorations. Of course, I do not want you to swallow this uncritically, just read *Volpone* again and you will see for yourselves that there is more than meets the eye in this respect.

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⁹ Samuel Johnson, "Cowley" from *The Lives of the English Poets* > *John Donne's Poetry*. Sel. and ed. by Arthur L. Clements (New York, W. W. Norton, 2nd edn., 1992) 142-5, 143.

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APPENDIX

THE CONCENTRIC LEVELS OF 'ACTION' AND 'AUDIENCE' IN JONSON'S *VOLPONE*; OR, *THE FOX* (1605).

ACT 1. SETTING: VOLPONE'S HOUSE.

	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3	Scene 4	Scene 5
Centre: focal point	Gold ¹⁰	Volpone	Volpone	Volpone	Volpone
1st circle: speaker or presenter	Volpone	Nano	Mosca	Mosca	Mosca
2nd circle: spectator (s) and or 'gulled' character (s)	Mosca (spectator)	Voltore (both)	Voltore (both)	Corbaccio (both)	Corvino (both)

ACT 2. SETTINGS SCENES 1, 2 & 3: THE SQUARE, BEFORE CORVINO'S SQUARE; SCENE 4: VOLPONE'S HOUSE; SCENE 5: CORVINO'S HOUSE; SCENE 6: VOLPONE'S HOUSE; SCENE 7: CORVINO'S HOUSE.

	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3	Scene 4	Scene 5	Scene 6	Scene 7
Centre: focal point	Sir Politic	Volpone (as Scoto of Mantua)	Volpone's show is disrupted by Corvino	Volpone	Celia	Volpone (and Celia <i>in absentia</i>)	Celia
1st circle: speaker or presenter	Peregrine (asides)	Sir Politic and Peregrine (frame to Volpone's mountebank show)	-	Volpone (he tells Mosca about his infatuation with Celia)	Corvino	Mosca	Corvino
2nd circle: spectator (s) and / or 'gulled' characters	-	Celia (she does not hear Sir Politic and Peregrine's comments, though)	-	Mosca	-	Corvino	-

¹⁰ However, Volpone associates himself to the Earth and gold to the son of the Sun. Volpone becomes the centre and gold the circling sun. On the other hand, in the astrological and alchemical symbolism, gold and the sun are represented with a circle with a dot in its centre: . This is another way of emphasizing the circle image in the play. Mosca is on stage while Volpone speaks, thus, he is the spectator of his monologue addressed to his gold.

ACT 3. SETTING: SCENES 1 & 2: A STREET; SCENE 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 & 9: VOLPONE'S HOUSE.

	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3	Scene 4	Scene 5	Scene 6	Scene 7	Scene 8	Scene 9
Centre: focal point	Mosca (monologue)	Mosca	Nano Castrone, Androgynon ¹¹	Lady Would-be	Sir Politic (<i>in absentia</i>)	-	Volpone ¹²	- 13	Volpone
1st circle: speaker or presenter	-	-	-	Nano, Volpone (Volpone complains about Lady Would-be)	Mosca	-	Corvino	-	Mosca ¹⁴
2nd circle: spectator (s) or 'gulled' character (s)	-	Bonario	Volpone	-	Volpone (spectator) Lady Would-be (cheated by Mosca)	- (Mosca hides Bonario)	Celia (offered to Volpone) Mosca (spectator)	-	Corbaccio
3rd circle: hidden spectator	-	-	-	-	-	-	Bonario (in the gallery)	-	Voltore

ACT 4. SETTINGS: SCENES 1, 2, 3: A STREET; SCENES 4, 5 & 6: THE SCRUTINEO.

	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3	Scene 4	Scene 5	Scene 6
Centre: focal point	Sir Politic (monologue)	Sir Politic	Peregrine	Voltore	Bonario and Celia	Bonario, Voltore, Celia,
1st circle: speaker or presenter	-	Lady Would-be	Mosca	Mosca	Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino	Lady Would-be, Voltore

¹¹ Nano speaks and Castrone and Androgynon listen to him. Nano is both the centre of attention and the speaker.

¹² When Mosca and Corvino leave, Volpone stops feigning and he becomes the focal point. He tries to woo Celia. At this point, theatrical self-consciousness is at its peak, as Volpone remembers his past as an actor and exclaims that he attracted the attention of the public (ll. 157-164). The song makes Volpone and Celia the centre of attention.

¹³ Mosca and Volpone find themselves in trouble as Bonario has unmasked them. Bonario destroys the different levels of action and performance when he leaves the gallery.

¹⁴ Mosca cheats Voltore too as he makes him interpret what he has seen in a totally different light. What he has seen becomes the centre of attention, Mosca continues to be the presenter and Voltore leaves the third level for the second one.

2nd circle: spectator (s) and / or 'gulled' character (s)	Peregrine (spectator)	Peregrine (comments the Would-be's conversation) 15	Lady Would-be (Mosca tells her about the courtesan)	Mosca, Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino.	Avoractori	Avocatori, Lady Would-be, Voltore, Corbaccio, Covino.
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¹⁵ At the end of the scene, Peregrine becomes its focal point.

ACT 5. SETTING: SCENES 1, 2, 3, 5: VOLPONE'S HOUSE; SCENE 4: SIR POLITIC'S HOUSE; SCENES 6, 7, 8 & 9: A STREET; SCENEA 10 & 12: THE SCRUTINEO; SCENE 11: A STREET.

	Sc. 1	Sc. 2	Sc. 3	Sc. 4	Sc. 5	Sc. 6	Sc. 7	Sc. 8	Sc. 9	Sc. 10	Sc. 11	Sc. 12
Centre: focal point	Volpone (alone)	Volpone	Mosca	Sir Politic	-	Corbaccio, Corvino	Voltore	Mosca <i>passant</i>	Mosca	Bonario, Celia	Volpone	Bonario, Celia
1st circle: speaker or presenter	-	Mosca	Mosca Volpone (asides)	Peregrine (disguised) & three merchants ¹⁶	-	Volpone (disguised)	Voltore	Volpone (disgu.)	Volpone	Voltore ¹⁷	Nano, Androg.	Volto re Volp. 18
2nd circle: spectator (s) and / or 'gulled' character (s)	-	-	Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, L. Would-be	Sir Politic	-	Corbaccio, Corvino	Volpone (disgu.)	Corb., Corv.	Voltore (cheated by Mosca & Volpone)	Avoc., Notario, Comm.	-	Corvino, Corbaccio, Avoc. Notario, etc.

¹⁶ In this scene the division is problematic. There is only the centre and a circle in fact, but they are further complicated because Peregrine is disguised, that is to say, he is offering a show. Sir Politic is both the centre of the scene and the victim of Peregrine deceit.

¹⁷ Corbaccio and Corvino can be said to be a sort of intermediate level between Voltore and the Avocatori. Thus, this scene would have four levels or circles of audience, instead of three. Certainly, this is the most complex scene as regards to this aspect in the whole play.

¹⁸ There is a chaotic confusion in the different levels of action and performance at the end of the play as Voltore pretends to be possessed and then Volpone reveals the truth. The attention shifts from Bonario and Celia, to Voltore and then to Volpone who eventually destroys the whole structure by confessing the truth.

Figure 1. Illustration from *Volpone* by Ben Jonson, programme for Matthew Warchus's 1995 Royal National Theatre production at the Olivier Theatre of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (N. p., National Theatre, 1995) [19]. The source of the illustration is not acknowledged, however, it is accompanied by the following quotation from T. H. White, *The Book of Beasts*, a translation of a 12th-century Latin bestiary (no page or any other information is provided in the programme); presumably, this image belongs to the same bestiary:

Vulpis the fox gets his name from the person who winds wool (Vulpis) -for he is a creature with circuitous pug marks who never runs straight but goes on his way with tortuous windings. He is a fraudulent and ingenious animal. When he is hungry and nothing turns up for him to devour he rolls himself in red mud so that he looks as if he were stained with blood. Then he throws himself on the ground and holds his breath, so that he positively does not seem to breathe. The birds, seeing that he is not breathing, and that he looks as if he were covered with blood with his tongue hanging out, think he is dead and come down to sit on him. Well, thus he grabs and gobbles them up.

Figure 2. God, Nature and Man, from Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi Historia* (1617-1619), reproduced as Figure 4 in G. Blakemore Evans, *Elizabethan-Jacobean Drama. A new Mermaid Background Book* (London, A & C Black, 1987).

Figure 3. The sorcerer's circle as depicted on the title page of the 1631 edition of Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. (From John S. Mebane's *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age. The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson and Shakespeare*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989, rptd. 1992).

Figure 4. Introductory dumb-show to the play proper (addition, not in Jonson's original). Left to right above: Castrone (Jonathan Stone), Nano (Wayne Carter) and Androgyno (Joyce Henderson).

Volpone. Royal National Theatre at the Olivier Theatre (1995). Photograph: Ivan Kyncl, 53 St. Donatt's Rd., London SE 14 6NU.

Figure 5. Nano, Castrone and Androgyno's show (3. 2.). Volpone (Michael Gambon), centre; Mosca (Simon Russell Beale), far left; Castrone (Jonathan Stone), to Volpone's right; Androgyno (Joyce Henderson), behind Volpone; Nano (Wayne Cater), right.

Volpone. Royal National Theatre at the Olivier Theatre (1995). Photograph: Ivan Kyncl, 53 St. Donatt's Rd., London SE 14 6NU.

Figure 6. Celia and Bonario's trial at the Scrutineo (5. 12.). Left to right: Mosca (Simon Russell Beale), Corbaccio (Trevor Peacock), Corvino (Robin Soans), Voltore (Stephen Boxer), Bonario (Mark Lewis Jones), Celia (Matilda Ziegler). Above: notarios (Charles Millham and Malcolm James) and Avvocatori (Seymour Matthews, John Griffiths and Paul Benzing).

Volpone. Royal National Theatre at the Olivier Theatre (1995). Photograph: Ivan Kyncl, 53 St. Donatt's Rd., London SE 14 6NU.