

Stefan Zweig's *Volpone, eine lieblose Komödie*: a reassessment¹

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ABSTRACT

Stefan Zweig's influential adaptation of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* has given rise to a significant number of journal articles and reviews that have highlighted its most outstanding features. The new version's improved structure and its amiable tone have been repeatedly noted as Zweig's most prominent achievements. A thorough analysis of his adaptation, however, often provides evidence to the contrary and suggests reappraisal of these previous conclusions may be advisable.

KEYWORDS: Stefan Zweig, *Volpone*, Ben Jonson, critical reassessment

1. Introduction

Stefan Zweig's (1926) dramatic version of *Volpone* in German was met with an enthusiastic reception both in Europe and in the United States. His free version was first staged in Vienna on November 6th, 1926,² followed shortly after by numerous performances both in Germany and Switzerland. Zweig's version, in short, proved so successful that it was soon translated into different languages and, during the 1920s, it was staged all over Europe and even in New York.³ In a letter⁴ addressed to Jules Romains, the French translator of his free version, Zweig drew attention to this fact. He said:

Vous avez dû rencontrer partout en Allemagne et en Autriche mon *Volpone* sur la scène. C'est devenu un très gros succès [...] On montera

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² It was premièreed at its National Theatre, der Wiener Burgtheater.

³ It was successfully premièreed at the Guild Theater on 9 April 1928.

⁴ Letter written in Salzburg on 10 January 1927. Quoted by Rony (1993:334).

ma pièce maintenant à Leningrad et en Italie et en Hollande ... on aurait en France aussi un gros succès.⁵

The fact that Stefan Zweig was a Jew led to the play's banishment from all German and Austrian cities under the Nazi régime, and it was not performed again in Germany or Austria until 1947. His theatrical version, however, succeeded in drawing the interest of translators and stage directors alike, so that a translation into Norwegian (Bronken) was made in 1965 and a Danish translation (Albrechtsen) was completed as late as 1977.

The influential nature of this version has resulted in its mention in a great number of journal articles and reviews. These have centred on the transformations Zweig made to the original and specific performances of this new version. Critics have discussed the play's structure, characters, thematic concerns and mood. They have often noted its modern qualities, and, more specifically, its quick tempo, the absence of superfluous scenes and characters. Most significantly, they address the switch in principal character from Volpone to Mosca. This, according to most of them, provides the play with a sunnier dénouement, where strict punishment gives way to generous reconciliation. A thorough review of this scholarship,⁶ however, often reveals a partial reading of the text, in which specific passages are considered in isolation although later taken as representative of the whole work. This is often the case with the ending of the play, which can lead critics to forget the true nature of Mosca. Many critics tend to draw rash conclusions about the improvement of Zweig's version on Jonson's original script, so that they often point to the more refined and amiable tone of Zweig, and, where they spot traces of condemnable roughness, they repeatedly try to justify them as an attempt on Zweig's part to provide his text with an Elizabethan atmosphere. It is the aim of this paper to qualify many of these assertions by setting both texts in due contrast.

⁵ Trans. [You must have come across my *Volpone* in a large number of German and Austrian theatres. It has become a great success [...] My play is about to be performed in Leningrad as well as Italy and Holland [...] This piece would no doubt prove as highly successful in France as it has been elsewhere.] Zweig was right in anticipating the positive reception of Romain's free version (1928), which was staged at the Atelier, Paris, on 23 November 1928 and run for over 250 nights after its première.

⁶ Cf. Richter (1927), McPherson (1973), Forsyth (1981), Daviau (1983), Macris (1983), as well as reviews by Fontana (1926), Jacobson (1926) and Wolff (1926), among others.

2. From Ben Jonson to Stefan Zweig

Stefan Zweig (1926) introduced substantial changes into Ben Jonson's text that affected not only its dramatic structure but also the portrayal of its characters and the overall atmosphere of the play. Even though he followed Jonson's general outline, he changed the dénouement of the original play and modified the attitudes, and even the names, of some characters. Finally, he cut a number of scenes that were originally found in Jonson's play (Herford and Simpson 1925-1952).

With regard to the similarities between the plots, it is worth stressing that Zweig's *Volpone*, like Jonson's, feigns approaching his own death. This is to attract covetous birds of prey who, with Mosca's help, offer him rich presents in the hope of becoming his heirs. In both works, these valuable presents include Corvino's own wife and Corbaccio's inheritance which legally belongs to his only child. Ben Jonson's innocent victims, Celia and Bonario, are transformed by Zweig into Colomba and Leone, whose symbolic names represent their main features. Colomba behaves like a tame dove, whereas Leone boastingly roars like a *miles gloriosus* and succeeds in frightening Volpone into disappearing from the stage.

The overall tone of the play is substantially modified since, although avarice maintains a privileged position in Zweig's version and presides over the actions of Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore, it is second in importance to the portrayal of Volpone's pathological sadism, a feature that is nowhere to be found in Jonson's play. Jonson's Volpone, unlike Zweig's, is motivated by the pleasure he derives from his cunning practices:⁷

... I glory
More in the cunning purchase of my wealth,
Than in the glad possession; since I gain
No common way (l.i. 30-33)

Zweig's Volpone, however, is moved by the pleasure he takes in torturing others and anticipating their painful reactions. Thus, when he imagines the stunning discovery of the greedy gang finding out

⁷ Some critics, however, thought that this Jonsonian quality was characteristic of Zweig's *Volpone*. Stoesst, for example, said: "[Volpone] macht aus seinem Betrug zugleich sein Hauptvergnügen" (9 November 1926) [Volpone takes his greatest delight in deceiving other characters]. And, surprisingly enough, he declared that Zweig's close dependence on Jonson's original text was responsible for its dark tone.

that their names have not been put in Volpone's testament, he exclaims: "Ach, ich will euch kälbern! [...] wird rasch wieder rote Bäckchen kriegen, der kranke Volpone, wird immer gesünder werden, bis ihr selber die Kränke kriegt vor Habsucht und Galle kotzt" (1926:29)⁸. He continues to say:

Zertreten will ich das Gewürm, sie sollen sich so vor Bosheit krümmen, wie ich mich vor Lachen [...] Jetzt ist das Folterinstrument bereit, aber mach' gute Musik darauf, hörst du: nicht zu rasch, nicht zu hitzig, ich will's sehen, wie sie mit der Zunge schmatzen, wie ihre Fratzen sich allmählich auseinanderschieben, ehe ihnen der Hammer auf den Schädel fällt [...] Ich will sie erst grinsen sehen und Vergnügen glucksen über meiner Leiche, ich will sie zittern sehen und zappeln mit der Angel im Maul und ungeduldig werden nach dem Testament und dann erst, wie sie erschrecken, schauern, wüten, sich erbozen, sich erhitzen. Dann brech' ich heraus mit der Peitsche und das Herz wird dir tanzen, wie ich ihnen die Beine peitschen werde. (1926: 71)⁹

The play's sombre tone is not limited to Volpone but also affects other characters, although to a lesser extent. In fact, it is not only Corvino but also Corbaccio, Leone, the Judge, and even Canina – that courtesan who replaces Jonson's Lady Would Be –, who take pleasure exerting their revenge on others. Canina, for example, is ready to increase the suffering of innocent Leone, who is sent to the pillory in spite of the fact that he has prevented Volpone from raping

⁸ Trans. [Ah, I'll fox you [...] Poor sick Volpone will quickly regain his red cheeks, grow more and more healthy, till you yourselves get green-sick and vomit gall].

I am offering Langner's (1928) excellent translation of Zweig's version for most passages. I have only introduced the necessary changes in those few instances where she departs significantly from her source.

⁹ Trans. [I want to stamp upon the worms so that they writhe as much with malice as I do with laughter [...] Now the instrument of torture is ready but don't use it too quickly nor too rashly. I want to see them licking their chops, slowly, and slowly grinning before the hammer lands on their pates [...] I want to see them grinning first and floating round my corpse. I want to see them squirm and wriggle with the hook in their gullets and grow impatient for the will; only then must they be frightened, tremble, lash their tails, grow dangerous, and lose their heads. Then I'll burst in with my whip and your head and your heart will dance to see how I lash their legs!]

Even though Zweig's Volpone is obsessed with the idea of taking revenge on the covetous gang, it is only seldom that critics acknowledge this fact. B.'s testimony is therefore exceptional when he comments on Volpone's performance at the Burgtheater: "[Er] hat an ihrem gegenseitigen Haß sein teuflisches Vergnügen" (7 November 1926) [He took a devilish delight in the mutual hate that other characters felt for each other].

Colomba. Leone's outspokenness before the judges results in this punishment, and Canina, instead of taking pity on him, threatens to spread honey on his mouth so that wasps would come and sting him while he is tied to the pillory: "Ich lauf' hinüber, ihm Honig auf das Schandmaul schmieren, wenn er am Pranger steht, daß sich alle Wespen auf seinen Geifer setzen" (1926: 63).¹⁰

The play is pervaded with an atmosphere of oppressive torture that is particularly enhanced by the detailed description it provides of the strict enforcement of the law, which can resort to any type of cruel punishment. Volpone's awe-stricken description of a number of these inhuman practices is of first-rate importance in helping the audience to understand his pathological anxiety about the possibility that his deceitful ways may be discovered. Therefore, his address to Mosca on his dread of official Justice are most revealing of his feelings:

[*Schauernd vor Frost und Angst*] Ich gehe nicht, nein, ich gehe nicht [...] sie werden mich foltern, unter die Bleidächer legen [...] hinab in die Brunnen [...] Nein [...] ich gehe nicht zum Tribunal [...] ich weiß, wie sie inquirieren [...] die Folter [...] der Strapado [...] hab's einmal gesehen, wie sie die Winden aufgezogen, wie's da knackte und knirschte in den zerbrochenen Gelenken die Daumschrauben, die Zangen, die glühenden Zangen an den Nägeln [...] wie es pestete von verbranntem Fleisch, uh, uh [...] nein, ich gehe nicht. (1926: 51-52)¹¹

Even though Zweig no doubt drew inspiration for these grim descriptions from Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, he nevertheless made a substantial contribution of his own to the detailed and graphic account of the harsh forms of punishment that could be inflicted on him, as well as to the dread with which that possibility filled Volpone. Jonson's harshness is slight compared with Zweig's, since he resorts to the use of distancing devices such as the employment of indirect speech by the shrewd lawyer who is ready to utilize any

¹⁰ [I shall run to smear honey about his dirty mouth when he's in the pillory so that all the wasps will settle on his snout].

¹¹ Trans. [*Shuddering with cold and fear* I won't go, no, I won't go [...] they'll put me on the rack, drip melted lead on me [...] lower me into a well [...] they will stretch me on the rack, they will hang me [...] No [...] I won't go to court [...] I know there'll be an inquisition [...] the rack [...] the strappado [...] I once heard the broken joints cracking and grinding as they tightened the ropes, the thumbscrews, the pincers, the red-hot pincers, pulling out the nails [...] how it stunk of burning flesah! Ugh [...] ugh! [...] no, I won't go].

means that might help him manipulate the Court. Thus, when Volpone is brought before the judges, he hurries to make a moving description of his pitiful condition, urging the judges to find out whether Volpone is feigning sickness or not by subjecting him to different types of torture. Yet, the audience is never truly shocked by the detailed description that Voltore offers them. As a matter of fact, Voltore's shrewd employment of rhetorical questions counteracts any possible disquieting effect on the audience. When he asks the Court: "Perhaps he doth dissemble?" he is in fact levelling an indirect accusation of slander against them for having doubted Volpone's truthfulness. He has just been "*brought in, as impotent,*" and Voltore has already taken advantage of his testimonial proof by using it as conclusive evidence of Volpone's innocence: The testimony comes, that will convince,/ And put to utter dumbness their bold tongues (IV.vi.20-21).

And so, when he asks the Court: "Would you ha' him tortured?" nobody in the audience doubts that he is rejecting that remote possibility by holding it in derision. Nobody feels appalled when he encourages the Court: "Best try him, then, with goads, or burning irons;/ Put him on the strappado," in the same way as his ironic remark on the healing effects of torture ("I have heard,/ The rack hath cured the gout") can only draw a smile from the audience.

Zweig's version, however, is pervaded with a grim and awesome ambience that is progressively increased as Volpone is found guilty of deceit. Even though the truth comes out when he is supposedly dead, both the Judge and Leone are ready to inflict the most gruesome kind of torture on his corpse. The Judge is ready to have him hanged while his tongue is nailed to the gallows:

Einen guten Dienst hat diesem Verbrecher der Tod erwiesen, denn lebte er noch, ich schwöre euch's, so wäre keiner gepeitscht worden wie diese levantinische Geselle, ehe er an den Galgen kam. Aber noch sein Leib muß Buße tun für sein Verbrechen: am öffentlichen Platz lasse ich den Leichnam hängen und die Zunge annageln an den Galgen, daß man zur Warnung sehe, wie Betrug und Schändung gestraft wird in Venedig. (1926:80)¹²

¹² Trans. [Death did this criminal a good service, for if he were still alive, I swear to you no one should be whipped like this Levantine cur before ever he went to the gallows. But his body will do penance for his crimes. I shall have the corpse hung in the public square and the tongue nailed to the gallows as a warning, a symbol of the manner in which deceit and profanation are punished in Venice].

Leone is desperately looking for him in order to thrust his poniard into the corpse's guts, reap it open and throw its bowels to the hounds: "Dann seine Leiche: ich muß sie zerfetzen, ich muß, ich muß! Ich will ihm die Kaldaunen ausreißen und den Hunden zu fressen geben, ich will den Kadaver auf den Schandpfahl schleppen" (1926: 83).¹³

This sickening scene, however, never occurs since Mosca asks the Judge to give him Volpone's corpse to throw into the canal. He is explicitly asked, however, to tie a heavy stone around its neck, so that the corpse may be quietly eaten away by fish:

(*Mosca*) Nur eine Bitte noch, allergnädigster Herr! Erspart dem Leichnam die Schmach [...] Erlaubt, daß ich die Leiche still versenken lasse in den Kanal.

(*Der Richter*) Seid eine gute Seele! Also meinetwegen nur einen Stein um den Hals statt den Strick um die Gurgel: mögen die Fische Venedigs an ihm mehr Lust haben als die Menschen. (1926: 83)¹⁴

The overwhelming atmosphere that all these shocking scenes create is suddenly brought to an end by an unexpected happy ending that does not succeed in offsetting the dark tone of the play. Mosca's kind words when he adopts the new role of the generous inheritor, offering to share Volpone's fortune with the greedy birds of prey, can be easily seen through since this is the only means of making sure that they declare Volpone's testament valid. Once his purpose has been achieved, his new friends are invited to a feast where he tries to persuade his audience that he is ready to make unprecedented use of Volpone's gold. He says that he is ready to indulge in all kinds of pleasure his new fortune may lead him to: "Wir wollen jetzt lustig sein, von Volponens Schüsseln schmausen, von seinen Weinen trinken" (1926: 88).¹⁵

He declares, moreover, that he is going to set Volpone's gold free from its long lasting captivity: "So tanze, tanze, Geld: ich geb' dich

¹³ Trans. [Then his corpse - I must tear it to rags. I must, I must. I'll rip out his guts and throw them to the dogs. I want to drag his body to the pillory].

¹⁴ Trans. [(*Mosca*) Just one more request, most gracious sir! Spare the corpse dishonour [...] Spare the corpse the gallows! Allow me to have it sunk quietly into the canal. (*Judge*) You are a good soul. Very well, do it, but be sure to put a stone around his neck instead of the rope; may the fishes of Venice have more pleasure out of him than its citizens].

¹⁵ Trans. [We will be merry now, feast off Volpone's dishes, drink of his wines].

frei" (1926: 88),¹⁶ thereby pretending to ignore the fact that Volpone had never assumed the role of covetous miser, but had rather led a pleasurable life. Volpone's self-indulgence had been acknowledged by Mosca himself when he answered his rhetorical question: "Lebe ich schlecht? Schmeckst du Wasser in meinem Falerner, sind meine Teppiche dünn, meine Silberschalen leicht, stinkt wo nur ein Bläschen Armut in meinem Haus?" (1926: 9)¹⁷ with the following statement: "Ich wünsche mir nie besser zu leben. Ihr seid üppig wie ein Armenier, vollüstig wie ein Häufing, habt eine Freude an allen saftigen Dingen und vergeßt nicht die Weiber" (1926: 10).¹⁸

It is also at the end of the play that the disinherited gang start approaching the new inheritor with the covert intention of sharing his gold. That is why Voltore¹⁹ fawningly flatters him by saying: "Ja, das war Volponens bester Gedanke, Euch zum Erben zu setzen" (1926: 85),²⁰ an attitude that is also shared by Corvino, who tells him: "Ihr seid ein Wackerer Junge, Mosca,"²¹ as well as by Corbaccio, who exclaims: "War't immer redlich [...] Ihr allein,"²² and, finally, by Voltore, who makes an open avowal of his sincere friendship: "Sei gewiß meiner aufrichtigen Freundschaft."²³

¹⁶ Trans. [Dance, then, my money, dance! I set you free!].

¹⁷ Trans. [Do I live badly? Do you taste water in my Falernian, are my carpets thin, my silver compotes light, is there one stinking little blister of poverty in all my house?].

¹⁸ Trans. [I hope I never live worse. You are as luxurious as an Armenian, as lustful as a stallion, take your pleasure in all luscious things, and don't forget the women].

Although it is hard to believe in Mosca's final contraposition between his own liberality and Volpone's presumed avarice, he seems to have persuaded some of the critics that attended Zweig's première. Leopold Jacobson, for example, declared that "Mosca hat nicht die Freude am Besitzt, sondern daran, das Geld in Genuß umzuziehen" (7 November 1926) [What Mosca values most is not the possession of gold but, rather, putting it into circulation], whereas, in his opinion, "Volpone ist der schleue Habgierige in Großformat, ein Levantiner [...] der die anderen Habgierigen ausplündert, und immer auf neue Mittel sinnt, um neue Schätze zu häufen" [Volpone is the sly covetous man par excellence, a Levantine [...] who robs other covetous characters of their money and is always devising new means of heaping up riches]. In the end he reached the following conclusion regarding the philosophy of the play: "Diese Weltanschauungskontrast ist die lineare Philosophie der Komödie" [The linear philosophy of this comedy lies in the contrast between both world views].

¹⁹ Although the judge says these lines in the printed version, it was Voltore who delivered them at the Burgtheater. This change fittingly underlined the fawning obsequiousness of the different characters towards the new heir.

²⁰ Trans. [Volpone's best idea was to make you his heir].

²¹ Trans. [You are a fine lad, Mosca].

²² Trans. [You were always honourable [...] you alone].

²³ Trans. [Be assured of my sincere friendship].

The play, therefore, ends in a tone of apparent happiness where Volpone's supposed covetousness is replaced with Mosca's presumed generosity. The truth, however, is that Mosca fully resembles his master in that he is as self-centered and self-indulgent as he²⁴. Like Volpone, he is fully aware of the true nature and intentions of those who join in his feast, as he unambiguously reveals: "Ich danke euch und glaub' davon, was ich glauben wird" (1926: 85).²⁵

The play's final note of happiness does not succeed in countering the play's sustained tone of anguish, fear and resentment which pervades it from its opening scenes. Furthermore, its dénouement goes against the principle of poetic justice, according to which all evil characters – and not just a few – must receive their due. In Zweig's version, however, only Volpone's greed and deceitfulness are punished, whereas Mosca's cunning practices are rewarded, in the same way that Corvino's, Corbaccio's and Voltore's revolving covetousness is left unpunished. They are even returned the presents they once offered Volpone in the hope of becoming his heirs. Their grave affronts against honour, family relationships and the law are left without the punishment that Ben Jonson bestowed them. Thus, Corvino, instead of being deprived of the wife he once tried to prostitute, is happily left in her company while neither she nor Venetian Justice make the slightest reproach concerning his past behaviour. Corbaccio is likewise left with all the possessions that he had tried to deprive his heir of, and, instead of being secluded in a Monastery where he could be cured of his avarice, he is allowed to go on with his usurious practices. Voltore's false testimony in

²⁴ The anonymous review that appeared in "Theater und Kunst Burgtheater" fittingly pointed to Mosca's self-interested and sly handling of the situation at the end of the play: "Nur der abgefeimste Betgrüger, der schmarozer Mosca, triumphiert über die von ihren Trieben genarrten und verschleudert, andere Leidenschaften frönend, das jedermann magnetisierende Gold" (7 November 1926) [It is the most consummate liar, Mosca the Parasite, who triumphs over all those whom he fools by means of this cheating devices and, while relishing the pain he inflicts on others, he tricks the ever-magnetizing gold away from them].

²⁵ Trans. [I thank you for your words and believe from them as much as I wish].

According to Ullman, Asland succeeded in expressing the essential features of Zweig's Mosca, particularly his ability to manipulate other characters: "Herr Asland spielt einen ... um die Finessen der Niedrigkeit wissenden Windteufel" (9 November 1926) [Herr Asland plays the role of the knowing devil who is well aware of man's lowest instincts].

Volpone's case doesn't seem to deserve punishment either and he is given free leave to go on transgressing Venetian laws.

Paradoxically enough, it is not evil, but good that is punished, as is the case with Leone, the only character who comes to Colomba's (Jonson's Celia) aid when Volpone is attempting to rape her. He is rewarded with the pillory, while Colomba does not utter a single word to prevent it. Instead, she shows pity for Volpone when he is brought to Court as an invalid: "Der arme Mann ... wie er mir leid tut! Ich will für ihn beten" (1926: 63).²⁶

The liberating note of the ending is therefore only superficial, since, on the one hand, true justice does not prevail and, on the other, the lack of general and harsh punishment for the guilty party does not succeed in thwarting the gloomy tone that prevails throughout the play, in the same way as Ben Jonson's severe ending did not diminish the comedy's playful tone. As a matter of fact, the epilogue that he added at the end of the play proved particularly relevant in making sure that the audience felt free to express their own amused reaction to the play:

The seasoning of the play is the applause.
Now, though the Fox be punished by the laws,
He, yet, doth hope there is no suffering due,
For any fact, which he hath done 'gainst you;
If there be, censure him: here he, doubtful, stands.
If not, fare jovially, and clap your hands. (V.xii. 1-6)

3. Critical opinions on Zweig's theatrical adaptation of *Volpone*

Critics have repeatedly dealt with the adaptation's dramatic structure, its character portrayal, subject matter and prevailing tone. As regards the first of these aspects it is worth pointing out that Zweig himself gave his own opinion on some of the changes that he had introduced into the play, especially on the suppression of all the scenes where Jonson had resorted to the use of disguise. He argued that this dramatic device was perceived as outmoded in his own day, which led him to do without it:

Läuft sie [die Komödie] leider über und aus in jene heute unmögliche Verwecklungskomödie des alten Theaters, wo ein Mann sich bloß einen

²⁶ Trans. [The poor man [...] how I pity him. I will pray for him].

anderen Hut aufsetzen und mit anderer Stimme zu sprechen braucht, um sofort damit der Welt unkenntlich zu sein. (28 September 1927)²⁷

That is no doubt the reason why Volpone was no longer able to play different roles in the comedy. Under Zweig, he could no longer dress up as a mountebank to approach Celia at her window, in the same way as he was no longer able to assume a variety of imaginary roles that might help Colomba feel attracted towards him in the seduction scene. He was likewise deprived of the possibility of mortifying the gulled gang of rapacious birds in the guise of a *commendatore*. Finally, Zweig removed Volpone's last triumphant gesture in suppressing the play's epilogue that Jonson had devised in order to draw a clear distinction between the laws of morality and those of drama. In his epilogue Volpone reminded his audience that they were allowed to show their approval for a comedy where a cunning individual had deceived a number of greedy and hypocritical characters that fully deserved their fate. Zweig, instead, had Volpone quietly disappear in the middle of the night, thus escaping Venetian Justice.

Unlike Jonson's Volpone, who daringly reveals his true identity before the judges, thereby inflicting severe punishment upon himself, Zweig's Volpone disappears fearful as ever, especially since Mosca threatens to wake Leone who is sleeping nearby and is anxious to take his revenge on him: "Ich zähle ___ ich zähle bis drei! Dann ruf' ich Leone."²⁸ He ends playfully transforming Leone's name, whom he starts to call: "Le-" into a farewell expression: "[Le-] ben sie wohl!" (1926: 87).²⁹

Zweig, in short, deprives Volpone of all those qualities that had made him attractive. In his version, Volpone no longer dares leave his home and risk being discovered, in the same way as he has no chance of contemplating Corvino's wife and feeling drawn towards her before her covetous husband takes her to Volpone's bed. He is also deprived of the opportunity of romantically wooing her, which would portray his character in a positive light. His last valiant

²⁷ Trans. [This comedy unfortunately makes use of any imaginable device that entails surprising changes in the features of characters, in a way similar to the common practice of the outmoded drama of the past. It was then usual for a character to become unrecognizable through the mere change of hat or the use of a different tone of voice].

²⁸ Trans. [I'll count – to three – to three! Then I call Leone].

²⁹ Trans. [Wish you godspeed!].

gesture is likewise removed, so that he can no longer become the brave hero that freely chooses his destiny. As a result, Zweig turns Volpone into a character that is both evil and cowardly. Therefore, it is his desire to torture Corvino, and not the attraction that he feels for Corvino's wife, Colomba, that makes him long for her: "Was brauchte ich [...] dieses Kalb Colomba, hatte nicht Lust auf sie eine Handvoll [...] nur Bosheit, nur Bosheit, nur Feuerzünden und Heißmachen und jetzt brennt es mir selbst in den Nieren" (1926: 51).³⁰

Even though Volpone makes his own feelings clear, we cannot forget that it was Mosca's devising that made him conceive the idea of seducing Corvino's wife as a means of tormenting him:

Laßt sehen [...] Corvino, wo faßt man denn? Dort, wo es am kitzligsten ist, natürlich. Geld __ nein! __die Würmer haben wir ihm schon auf der Nase gezogen, aber eifersüchtig ist er, ich sagt's ja, wie ein Doppeltürke [...] wartet [...] wie wäre es, wenn man ihn so lange narrete, bis er selbst Euch die Frau zur Hornung brachte? (1926: 23-24)³¹

Also, when Volpone expressed serious doubts about the possibility of fulfilling their wicked plans: "Seine Frau? [...] Unmöglich."³² Mosca reassures him: "Meint Ihr?" and offers to help him: "Ich krieg's Zustand."³³

The fact that Zweig chooses not to include the reason as to why Corvino was asked to take his wife to Volpone so that he might recover from his last stroke, increases the degree of his wickedness and lack of moral scruples. Zweig's Mosca does not tell Corvino that the doctors have prescribed Volpone the company of a virtuous woman as the only way of preventing his certain death but, instead, he reveals that Volpone has recovered from his last fit and is now craving the company of an attractive young woman: "Er schmatzt nur so von Wohlbehagen [...] Der alte Geilbock gibt keine Ruhe, wiehert wie ein Hengst, heute noch müsse er ein Weib haben und

³⁰ Trans. [Why did I take [...] that moon-calf Colomba? I didn't have a grain of desire for her [...] just malice [...] just malice [...] just lighting a fire under them, and now it's burning in my own bowels].

³¹ Trans. [Corvino. Where can we get him? In his sorest spot, of course. Money – no, we've robbed him thoroughly already; but you yourself say he's jealous as two Turks [...]. Wait [...] how would it be if we beduffed him so well that he himself brought you his wife, so you could horn him].

³² Trans. [His wife? Impossible!].

³³ Trans. [D'you think so? I'll manage it].

schon sagt er mir, ich solle ihm eines schaffen, ein sanftes, appetitliches Weibchen" (1926: 31).³⁴

Corvino is therefore to blame for his readiness to offer Volpone his legitimate wife since he does not have the slightest doubt about Volpone's condition nor his true intentions regarding Colomba. What is more, he specifically asks her to look as beautiful as possible: "Den Mantel um, so, den Busen offen, die Ärmel aufgestreift, da noch ein paar Blumen und das rate ich dir: mach' ein freundliches Gesicht."³⁵ Then, when Colomba expresses her fears that Volpone's advances be too forward: "Aber wenn er mich nimmt?" (1926: 44),³⁶ Corvino unashamedly acknowledges this possibility: "Dann nimmt er dich eben!" (1926: 44)³⁷ and drags her to Volpone's bedroom.

Volpone, in turn, shows no greater delicacy when addressing Colomba, since he warns her that Corvino will never come to her aid, no matter how loud she may cry as he rapes her. He adds that he would sooner stuff his ears with cotton than come to her rescue: "wäre er nebenan, er stopfte sich die Ohren mit Watte. Glaubst du, er weiß nicht, wozu ich dich wollte?"³⁸ He then makes clear that Corvino has sold her out to him: "[Er] hat dich verkauft, hat dich verschachert, mein Täubchen."³⁹

Volpone's would-be heirs are no more subtle in the expression of their deepest desire, particularly of the long-awaited death of Volpone. Corvino repeatedly states his wish that death may seize him when in Colomba's sweet company. These are his words: "Apoplexia, habe ich auch gehört, befällt häufig die alten Männer gerade im schönsten Übereinander!" (1926: 31).⁴⁰

Corbaccio takes a pathological delight in death which is even greater at the idea of Volpone's imminent decease. He acknowledges his fondness for visiting those that are about to pass on and only hopes that Volpone's symptoms resemble the ones he knows so well:

³⁴ Trans. [He's licking his very chops with well-being [...] He whickered like a stallion, saying he must have a woman this very day, and he's commanded me to fetch him one. A gentle, appetizing little woman].

³⁵ Trans. [On with your cloak – so, with your breast bared, your sleeves short! There, just a few flowers now, and I advise you to look friendly].

³⁶ Trans. [But if he takes me [...] ?].

³⁷ Trans. [Then he takes you].

³⁸ Trans. [If he were in the next room he'd stuff his ears with cotton-wool. Do you think he doesn't know why I wanted you?].

³⁹ Trans. [He sold you, he bartered you, my little dove].

⁴⁰ Trans. [I've heard [...] that apoplexy often overcomes old men right in the very midst of things].

Ich [...], hehe, ich [...], hehe [...] Seh' mir gern Sterbende an. Hab' schon so viele gesehen, seh's immer lieber [...] Hehe, dann kommt's bald [...] kenn ich [...] oft gesehen [...] jetzt wird's bald lustig [...] dann keine Luft, pumpt,[...] pumpt [...] pumpt [...] kriegt's nicht mehr herauf [...] blau dann, blaß [...] hehe, jetzt kommt's bald [...] dann starr, spürt nichts mehr [...] Ohren dumpf, Lider gelb [...] hehe, kenne das [...] ist bald soweit. (1926: 19-20)⁴¹

Volpone's approaching death does not seem to fill Mosca with discomfort either, since he calmly promises Corbaccio that he will remove his ring from Volpone's corpse before it gets cold with death: "Kaum, daß er kalt ist, zieh ich ihn [den Ring] ab von der Leiche!" (1926: 21).⁴²

Later on, when Mosca proclaims Volpone dead and realizes the need of certifying his death before opening his will, Corbaccio insists on making sure that this happens. When Mosca tells him: "Ein Blick wird euch überzeugen [...] Ihr seht; ganz regloss und starr" (1926: 76),⁴³ he suggests applying a flame to his feet as an effective method of deducing whether he is alive or not: "kann täuschen [...] besser noch Kerze nehmen [...] unter Füße brennen."⁴⁴

Other suggestions quickly follow. Corvino, for example, is for thrusting a dagger into his heart, which, in his opinion, could be particularly useful, should he not be completely dead: "[*Den Dolch ziehend*] Sicher ist sicher [...] einen kleinen Herzstoß zur Probe sollte man doch probieren [...] dem Toten wär's ohne Schaden und dem Scheintoten ein guter Dienst" (1926: 76).⁴⁵

Since Zweig's version increases the characters' wickedness it is somewhat surprising that he should impute that quality to Ben Jonson's play (28 September 1927): "Dieses Boshafte ohne jedes Warum und Weshalb der Bosheit ist aus reiner Freude an der

⁴¹ Trans. [I [...] he, he [...] he, he [...] I like to look at dying men. I've seen so many and I enjoy each one more. [...] He, he it's coming soon. I know [...] seen it often [...] it will soon be jolly [...] No air, pumps [...] pumps [...] pumps [...] can't raise any more [...] blue, then pale [...] he, he [...] coming soon now [...] then stiff, no feeling [...] ears dulled, lids yellow [...] he, he [...] I know [...] 'twill soon come to that].

⁴² Trans. [The corpse will scarcely be cold when I tear it (the ring) off its finger].

⁴³ Trans. [One look will convince you [...] you see, quite cold and stiff].

⁴⁴ Trans. [Deceptive [...] better still to burn a candle at the soles of his feet].

⁴⁵ Trans. [*Drawing his dagger* Safe is safe [...] a little jab in the heart to make sure [...] it wouldn't hurt the dead man and would be a real service to one who was seemingly dead].

Bosheit.”⁴⁶ Astonishingly enough, other critics share Zweig’s opinion on this point. Thus, for example, J.F. Wolff when reviewing the performance of Zweig’s version at the National Theatre of Dresden declared that Zweig had softened the play by removing all those expressions of human abjection that Jonson had brought to his play: “Ohne Stefan Zweig hätten in der starken und witzigen Komödie die menschliche Niedertracht und Ben Jonsons fürchterliche niedrige Meinung von der Gattung *homo sapiens* unerträgliche Orgien gefeiert” (27 November 1926).⁴⁷

A number of critics have also discovered an amiable tone in Zweig’s adaptation. The reason for it probably lies in the importance that they attribute to its happy ending, which leads them to ignore the fact that the last minute change is superficial. They repeatedly focus on Mosca’s transformation into an honest character who then becomes the play’s hero. What they do not share is their assessment of what the outcome of his change is. Richter, for example, regrets that “Sein Mosca [...] kriegt es mit der Angst, mit der Ehrlichkeit, fällt aus der Rolle” (1927: 190)⁴⁸ because, in his view, it prevents the enactment of Justice through a deserved punishment, that in Jonson’s play had fallen on Mosca. Other critics like Mcpherson (1973) and Forsyth (1981) express an opposite view of the matter, since, according to them, the most outstanding feature of the play’s dénouement is the triumph of a generous character who sets Volpone’s gold free.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Trans. [This unmotivated wickedness has no ground but the relish that characters take in evil-doing].

⁴⁷ Trans. [But for Stefan Zweig, man’s lowest instincts and Ben Jonson’s extremely poor opinion of human beings would have made this strong and witty comedy the realm of unbearable orgies].

⁴⁸ Trans. [His Mosca achieves it through his fear; he becomes honourable; he falls out of his role].

⁴⁹ It is somewhat surprising that even the Reichpost’s perceptive theatre critic, B. should be deceived by Mosca’s new adopted generosity. According to him, “Er wird dieses Gold besser zu nützen wissen als sein Herr, er wird es aus der Haft der Truhen befreien, und mit vollen Händen ausgeben. Er ist ein Philosoph, dieser nichtsnutzige Mosca, er verachtet das Gold, solange es gehäuft liegt” (7 November 1926) [He will make a better use of this gold than his master did; he will set it free from its trunk and then give it away. This unpractical Mosca is a true philosopher. He doesn’t value gold unless released from its prison]. This kind of appraisal was also shared by Marcus Fontana, who was impressed by Mosca’s final transformation into an open-handed heir: “Der Erbe wirft das Geld aus der Truhe, in die es eingesperrt, wieder in das Leben zurück. ‘Nicht Herr dir mehr, doch auch nicht dein Vasall: ich spiel’ mit dir: ich schenke dich an alle!” (7 November 1926) [Volpone’s heir takes the gold out of the

Mcpherson concludes the following: "Mosca emerges as hero, no one is punished, and Volpone's hoarded gold is put back into circulation" (1973: 82), and he adds: "Tender-minded readers of *Volpone* have always been appalled by the absence of any sympathetic character. The play is largely unconventional, that is, largely because it lacks a hero. Stefan Zweig's *Volpone* [...] removes the implacable quality [...] by transforming Mosca into a hero" (1973: 82).

In his view, Zweig's Mosca is "a gay and reluctant villain." When reducing the character's features to these positive qualities he seems to forget that Mosca has been Volpone's physical and psychological torturer throughout the play by having him drink gall and by filling his heart with fear. He also seems to ignore that it was him who suggested to Volpone the idea of feigning death so as to witness and relish the suffering of his deceived suitors when they opened the will and found out Mosca's name instead of their own. As a matter of fact, Mosca reminded Volpone that coffins have no holes through which to peep outside: "Aber Messer Volpone, wie wollt Ihr's sehen: Der Sargdeckel hat keine Löcher" (1926: 70),⁵⁰ so that his cunning device would afford him no pleasure unless he were alive when they opened his will. His reasoning proved effective, as Volpone's immediate reaction shows:

Mord's, das ist wahr: das wird mich im Leichenlaken noch wurmen, daß ich meinen Meisterstreich nicht erlebe, nicht seh', wie diese Schurken sich querüber in die Haare fahren. Gottes Zorn, den schönsten Spaß hab' ich da ausgesonnen und gerade bei der Kirchweih, wo sie sich die Schädel einschlagen, soll ich fort sein: verdammt. (1926: 70)⁵¹

That is why Mosca's later rejection of Volpone's plans: "Macht es allein. Ich hab' genug' [...] Tut's allein, Euer Spaßchen [...] Ich hab's satt." (1926: 71)⁵² cannot be taken at face value.

trunk where it has been locked up and throws it back into life. 'I won't be thy master any more, nor will I be thy servant. I am to play with you: I am going to give you away'.]

⁵⁰ Trans. [But, Messer Volpone, how can you see that? A coffin has no windows].

⁵¹ Trans. [I's blood, that's true, it will gall me in my shroud that I can't live to see and experience my masterprank, those scoundrels all at each other's throats. God's wrath, here I've conceived the finest thought and just at the baptism, when they are smashing in each other's skulls, I'm to be away; damn it].

⁵² Trans. [I've had enough [...] Play your little joke alone [...] I've had too much].

But Mcpherson is not the only critic to be deceived by this shrewd character, as Forsyth's assessment of Mosca reveals. According to him, "he has his moral scruples. Lying, for example, does not come easily to him" (1981: 622). In addition, he points out that Mosca's happy transformation into an amiable and generous character is closely connected with Zweig's personal and geographical background, with "[his] benevolence and, a particular Austrian streak, his sentimental ironic tolerance of man's foibles" (1981: 624).⁵³

Forsyth seems to be unable of noticing the slightest trait of that profound and pathological wickedness that can be perceived in most of Zweig's characters. Curiously enough, he turns them into passive beings who, far from being responsible for their despicable actions, are portrayed as mere victims of money's powerful manipulation. According to him, "Zweig makes [...] a kind of grammatical inversion; whereas in Jonson man is responsible for being led astray by money, in Zweig money is responsible for leading man astray" (1981: 622). Finally, Forsyth tries to substantiate this hypothesis by means of a song from the beginning of Zweig's version which voices this viewpoint:

Das Geld, das Geld vernarrt die Welt ...
Macht's klug: das Geld ist kluger noch,
Erkenn den Trug: er narrt dich noch.⁵⁴

No matter how convincing his justification may sound, the truth is that Zweig's adaptation is full of covetous characters that far surpass those of Jonson in the unscrupulous pursuit of gold. That makes it difficult for perceptive readers to share Forsyth's conclusion on their attitude: "[Zweig] establishes the idea of money as a comic fatality, a condition of diminished responsibility for man in which

⁵³ Forsyth's reading of this version may have been influenced by Zweig's own assessment of his adaptation, which, in a letter addressed to Romain Rolland (26 September 1925) he termed "une farce amusante sur l'argent" [An amusing farce about money], an opinion that was literally rendered two years later by Macris when he defined Zweig's adaptation as "[an] amusing farce about money" (1983: 193). Moreover, Forsyth's insistence on the play's "lightness of touch" (1981: 624) was equally supported by Daviau who also highlighted the version's "lightness of spirit and comic sensibility" (1983: 195).

⁵⁴ Trans. [Oh gold makes fools of young and old [...] / Act you may, to your dismay. / Know you are a fool: gold has its will].

there is no room for even a touch of tragedy as there was in the Jacobean view" (1981: 622).

Zweig's structural changes have also given rise to a number of critical opinions that could be further qualified. The new version's economy of design has often been praised even though it involves the suppression of the secondary plot as well as a number of scenes where Volpone resorts to the use of different disguises. Zweig's adaptation also reduces the total number of characters present in the play so that neither Sir Politic nor Lady Politic, Peregrine or the members of Volpone's deformed 'family' are present.

Even though the new version undoubtedly benefits from a swifter pace, it must be noted that this entails a loss of depth in character portrayal. It is, therefore, surprising that some critics, such as Richter, suggest different consequences of this change. According to him, the play's economy reduces the commentaries that other characters make on their actions so that, in his view, the outcome is a more direct onstage presentation of the different characters. However, when Richter welcomes the fact that in Zweig's version "die Personen charakterisieren sich selbst durch ihr Tun und Reden, statt von anderen geschildert zu werden" (1927: 183-184)⁵⁵ he seems to forget that the new economy of design also affects the actions of characters, which are equally reduced. As a result, Zweig's title role, for example, gains cowardice and wickedness. In conclusion, even though we can share Richter's observations on the benefits that derive from Zweig's reduction of Jonson's five acts to three, since, according to him, "die Handlung strafft sich, gewinnt and Geschlossenheit, Tempo und Kontinuität" (1927: 183),⁵⁶ the loss that this reduction entails cannot be ignored.

Forsyth also underlines the positive effects of certain structural changes. He points out that "the omission of the grotesque Nano, Castrone and Androgyno, the lengthy subplot and the too obedient Celia" help update the play. (1981: 624) It is, however, somewhat hard to understand how some of these modifications can produce that effect, since two of them had already been introduced by George Colman as early as 1711. The fact that aesthetic and moral reasons were then alleged to justify those changes is also revealing. So,

⁵⁵ Trans. [Characters are depicted by means of their own words and actions instead of being portrayed through the description made by others].

⁵⁶ Trans. [There is an increase in the play's tension, unity of action, tempo and continuity].

whereas the subplot was then removed in order to offer a clearer line of argument, the deformed family was suppressed so as to satisfy the refined sensibility of the audience. A quick look at Zweig's version, and particularly at the character of Canina, however, reveals that Zweig was not moved by the same reasons as Colman when he removed Nano, Androgyno and Eunuch from his adaptation. Moreover, critics such as Richter have perceived Canina's behaviour as immoral, since, in his view, "Zweig schafft [...] eine wirkliche Kurtisane derbniedrigsten Stils, deren Szenen zum stärksten gehören, das auf der Bühne möglich ist!" (1927: 189).⁵⁷

Thus, even though modern audiences reject lengthy plays and, therefore, any action taken in order to shorten them may help bring them up to date, the doubt still remains as to how the changes introduced by Zweig into Celia's too obedient disposition might have helped make this play more appealing for contemporary audiences. This remarkable aim could undoubtedly have been achieved if Celia had been transformed – as it has often been the case in recent adaptations – into a more independent type of character. But Forsyth's opinion on this matter can hardly be shared if what Zweig chooses to offer as a substitute for Jonson's Celia is an unsympathetic character who is both extremely submissive to her husband and most unfair to her saviour. Unlike Colomba, we have endeavoured to be less submissive to previous scholarship on Zweig's *Volpone, eine lieblose Komödie*. Our reappraisal of his free version has, moreover, attempted to be fair both to Jonson's magnificent play and to Zweig's outstanding adaptation.

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⁵⁷ Trans. [Zweig creates a true courtesan of the lowest style whose scenes belong to the grossest and rudest that could be possibly imagined onstage].

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