

## PART ONE: TEXT

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Jonson marked a new scene whenever the entry or exit of a character changed the focus of interest. This, the classical or French system, is used by most editors. References to the text here follow Brockbank's edition which uses this system. Some editors, however – for example, David Cook – prefer the modern English system. In this latter convention Act I, for example, has only one scene instead of five as in Jonson's own organisation of the text.

The plot of *Volpone* is original. As Alvin B. Kernan points out in the Yale edition of the play, Jonson began with an idea where Shakespeare began with a story; Jonson then illustrated that idea from his wide-ranging scholarship. Thus, though it has no specific source, *Volpone* draws on the literature and drama of the past. The idea of legacy-hunting, for example, can be found in Horace and Lucian and Petronius, and the play contains echoes of the Bible, Aesop's Fables, Aristophanes, Juvenal, Tacitus and Erasmus – to name but a few obvious connections.

## 2 RARE BEN

Hazlitt\* tried hard to like Jonson but found his power repulsive and unamiable. Tennyson could not read him because he appeared to move 'in a wide sea of glue'. Bernard Shaw called him a brutal pedant, while Edmund Wilson characterised the author of *Volpone* as an anal erotic. Coleridge\* dubbed him a mammoth or megatherium; Taine, and later Arthur Symonds, saw him as a Spanish galleon (while Shakespeare was an English man-o'-war). William Archer likened him to the pyramids, the Tower of London, and a tank. (A tank – or a galleon, for that matter – is, of course, slow, bulky and

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\* Authors and critics signalled by an asterisk, as here, will be found excerpted in the Casebook on *Volpone*, edited by Jonas A. Barish.